

MICHELLE LEVINE

*Maimonides' Philosophical
Exegesis of the Nobles'
Vision (Exodus 24):
A Guide for the Pursuit
of Knowledge*

I.

In order to appreciate the genius and profundity of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis, one must consider the diverse factors that shape each commentator's analysis of a biblical text. The exegete ponders syntax, style, and context. He responds to and builds upon his predecessors' interpretations. He formulates his exegetical path according to his theology and world-view; philosophy, science, and politics mold his perspective. A study of these multiple facets reveals the poetics of biblical exegesis, the essential principles and implicit suppositions that govern the commentator's final word on a biblical text.

Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* illustrates the influence of philosophy on his commentary to the Bible. While one may argue that part of Maimonides' objective in writing the *Guide* is to introduce a gifted reader to philosophy, Maimonides stipulates that his purpose is exegetical. In the Epistle Dedicatory to his student, R. Joseph ben Judah,

MICHELLE LEVINE is Assistant Professor of Bible at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University. She received her doctorate in medieval biblical exegesis from New York University.

Maimonides declares his intent to reveal the “secrets of the prophetic books”¹ to his worthy disciple.² In his introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides discloses his intention “to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy” (Introduction: 5) and elucidate the “very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets” (Introduction: 6). Maimonides applies Proverbs 25:11, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Introduction: 11), to illuminate the double layers of meaning embedded within prophetic parables; while the external dimension is compared to silver filigree, the internal meaning corresponds to gold. Both levels of interpretation have significant value for the student of the Bible. The external meaning conveys “wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” and the internal meaning imparts “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is” (Introduction: 12).³

Maimonides considers his exegetical task to divulge the esoteric meaning of the Bible, whose basis is philosophy.⁴ In Maimonides’ view, the Bible expresses truths of Aristotelian physics (corresponding to the study of *Ma’aseh Bereshit*) and metaphysics (corresponding to the study of *Ma’aseh Merkavah*) by employing symbolic, figurative language. Through this literary medium, the Bible conceals its esoteric meaning from those uninitiated into philosophy. However, it is this understanding which exposes the true meaning of the biblical text. Maimonides does not see himself as artificially imposing interpretations on the biblical verses for the sake of meshing philosophy with the Bible. He aims to unlock the “golden” interpretation of the Bible, which, from his perspective, is one that reveals philosophical doctrines embedded within the biblical parables. Insofar as the *Guide* serves as an important commentary to the Bible, its exegetical approach has philosophy at its core.⁵

In order to demonstrate the integral relationship between philosophy and exegesis in the *Guide*, this paper will analyze Maimonides’ philosophical interpretation of the vision of the nobles of Israel in Exodus 24:9-11.⁶ In this context, the covenant is sealed with Israel’s acceptance of its conditions. Burnt offerings are sacrificed before God; the nation is sprinkled with the sacrificial blood in a symbolic affirmation of their newly established relationship with God. Following the conclusion of this covenant, the chapter relates,

Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel went up. They saw (*va-yir’u*) the God of Israel: beneath His feet like the

work of sapphire tiles (*ke-ma'aseh livnat ha-sappir*) and like the substance of the heavens in purity (*u-khe-ezem ha-shamayim la-tohar*). Yet against the nobles of the children of Israel (*azilei benei Yisrael*)⁷ He did not send forth His hand. They beheld (*va-yehezu*) God and they ate and drank.

Consistent with the approach he outlines in his introduction to the *Guide* (15), Maimonides disperses his exegesis of Exodus 24 throughout his monumental work.⁸ He analyzes the content of the vision and assesses the subsequent behavior of the nobles in three of the lexicographical chapters, 1:4, 5, and 28. He refers again to the nobles' vision in 2:26, within his discussion of a statement in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* concerning the process of creation. He reiterates his exegetical perspective of the nobles' vision in 3:4, in the course of his analysis of Jonathan ben Uziel's rendition of Ezekiel's vision of the chariot. The fact that Maimonides addresses the nobles' apprehension within all three sections of his magnum opus testifies to the significance of this episode for his philosophical exegesis within the *Guide*.⁹

II.

Maimonides begins his discussion by defining the medium through which the nobles perceive their vision. Because Maimonides believes the Bible's parables have an external and internal dimension, he discerns that biblical terms often have more than one connotation. In 1:4 of the *Guide*, Maimonides proposes both a literal and figurative meaning (*hash'alah*)¹⁰ for three verbs relating to sight: *ra'oh*, *hazoh*, and *habbit*. Literally, these terms refer to visual perception; metaphorically, they denote intellectual cognition. When applied to God, the terms for sight are understood exclusively in the metaphorical sense.

Know that the three words, ראה, הביט וראה, are applied to the sight of the eye and that all three of them are also used figuratively to denote the grasp of the intellect. . . . Every mention of seeing, when referring to God, may He be exalted, has this figurative meaning¹¹—as when Scripture says: *I saw the Lord* (I Kings 22:19); *And the Lord appeared to him* (Gen. 18:1); *And God saw that it was good* (Gen. 1:10); *Pray, let me see Your Glory* (Ex. 33:18); *And they saw (va-yir'u) the God of Israel* (Ex. 24:10). All this refers to intellectual apprehension and in no way to the eye's seeing, as the eye can only apprehend a body . . . with some of the accidents of the body. . . . Similarly, God, may He be exalted, does not apprehend by means of an instrument . . . *hazoh* is likewise used to designate the eye's seeing. Thus: *And let our eyes see Zion* (Micah 4:11). It has been applied figuratively to the apprehension of the heart. Thus: *Which he saw concerning Judah and*

Jerusalem (Is. 1:1); *The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision* (Gen. 15:1). The word is used in the same figurative sense¹² when it is said: *And they saw (va-yeḥezu) God* (Ex. 24:11). Know this. [1:4:27-28]

Maimonides' application of the figurative meaning for sight to the human being and God has important ramifications. While God's apprehension is essentially different from that of the human being, this juxtaposition illuminates how the human being possesses "divine-like" qualities in his ability to cognize in the intellectual realm. This presumption correlates with Maimonides' figurative interpretation of man as a creation in the image of God (*be-zelem Elokim*-Gen. 1:27). Maimonides identifies this quality with man's intellectual apprehension. Since man applies his intellect with "no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used . . . this apprehension was likened unto the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument. . . ." (1:1:23)

Despite the apparent correlation between man and God's apprehension, Maimonides segregates his discussion of divine "sight" to teach the significant difference between these forms of cognition.¹³ Likewise, Maimonides emphasizes that since God does not possess a body or shape, in reality man's intellect is not like that of God "but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion" (1:1:23). Not only does Maimonides disengage God's sight from the corporeal realm but even on the intellectual plane, he distinguishes divine cognition (and cognition of the divine) from man's abstract apprehension.¹⁴ This approach is consistent with Maimonides' general view that God's attributes are entirely different from their human counterparts, as explained in 1:53-60 of the *Guide*.

Maimonides clarifies that the nobles attain their vision in Exodus 24 in the form of an intellectual perception through the prophetic medium.¹⁵ While this vision incorporates a corporeal element (as will be delineated in 1:5), the apprehension itself does not take place in the realm of the senses. Because Maimonides does not distinguish figuratively between *ra'oh* and *ḥazoh*, he concludes that there is only one prophetic apprehension which is described in 24:10.¹⁶ *Va-yeḥezu et ha-Elokim* (24:11), which introduces the cause of the nobles' reaction to their experience, may be rendered, "Having perceived God (in the manner described in 24:10), they ate and drank."¹⁷

In 1:5, Maimonides assesses the content of the nobles' vision and critiques their subsequent conduct.

The nobles of the children of Israel¹⁸ . . . achieved apprehension, but only an imperfect one. Hence it is said of them: *They saw the God of Israel and there was under His feet* . . . (Ex. 24:10); and not merely: *They saw the God*

of Israel. For these words are solely intended to present a criticism of their act of seeing, not to describe the manner of their seeing. Thus, they were blamed solely for the form that their apprehension took inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent¹⁹ . . . They deserved to perish . . . and I shall say: Because of the hindrances that were a stumbling block to the nobles of the children of Israel in their apprehension,²⁰ their actions too were troubled; because of the corruption of their apprehension, they inclined toward things of the body. Hence, it says: *And they beheld God and ate and drank* (Ex. 24:11). [1:5:30]²¹

Commentators to the *Guide* assume that Maimonides implicitly foreshadows his critique of the nobles' vision within his discussion in 1:4. Their analysis hinges on their presumption that Maimonides' mode of presentation intimates his assessment of a biblical episode. In his discussion of *ḥazoh* in relation to "seeing" God, Maimonides cites Isaiah 1:1 and Genesis 15:1. He then separates Exodus 24:11 (*Va-yeḥezu et ha-Elokim*) from these citations with the qualifying statement, "The word is used in the same figurative sense." This demarcation signifies that Maimonides does not consider the vision of Exodus 24 to be on par with the prophecies of Abraham and Isaiah. As Maimonides explains in 1:5, the nobles of Israel perceive an incomplete cognition of God that leads to corrupt actions. Maimonides emphasizes the importance of this distinction with his concluding remark in 1:4, "Know this."²²

If Maimonides embeds his criticism of the nobles' vision in his discussion of *ḥazoh*, why does he not isolate Exodus 24:10 (*Va-yir'u et Elokei Yisrael*) from among other examples supporting the figurative meaning of *ra'oh* in relation to God?²³ I would like to propose that in fact Maimonides' presentation in 1:4 also conveys his intent to distinguish Exodus 24:10 in its own category. Maimonides arranges the prooftexts for the figurative meaning of *ra'oh* in the following order: I Kings 22:19 (*I saw the Lord*), Genesis 18:1 (*And the Lord appeared to him*), Genesis 1:10 (*And God saw that it was good*), Exodus 33:18 (*Pray, let me see your Glory*), and Exodus 24:10 (*They saw the God of Israel*). Behind this schema lies a thematic logic. The examples from I Kings and Genesis 18 relate God as the initiator of a divine vision to be apprehended by man. Exodus 33 highlights Moses' request to perceive the essence of God. Genesis 1:10, "And God saw . . ." is centered, serving as the catalyst both for God's appearance before man and man's desire to see Him. The fact that God sees His creations enables Him to be the object of man's vision and inspires great men to seek Him. Accordingly, Exodus 24:10, which describes God's appearance to man, should have been positioned following the first or second biblical citation. By setting

this vision apart from those in I Kings and Genesis, Maimonides intimates his censure of the nobles' incomplete apprehension of God.²⁴

Maimonides' criticism of the nobles' vision is also made apparent through his incongruous juxtaposition of Exodus 24:10 with Moses' desire to apprehend God in Exodus 33. Moses' audacious request is predicated upon his presumption that he has completed the necessary preparation to enable him to apprehend God's essence; yet God determines that not even Moses may be privy to such knowledge. In contrast to the prophetic heights which Moses achieves, Maimonides will explain in 1:5 of the *Guide* that the nobles apprehend an imperfect vision of God precisely because they do not undergo the training required to attain a complete understanding of God, as much as He permits.²⁵

In contrast to the aforementioned analysis, Profiat Duran (Efodi) claims that Maimonides confines his censure of the nobles' vision exclusively to his discussion of the figurative meaning for *ḥazoh*. Having perceived God, the nobles "ate and drank" (24:11), activities which Maimonides renders literally in 1:5. The involvement in physical pleasures rather than spiritual pursuits leads Maimonides to conclude that the nobles' vision does not represent an achievement of divine knowledge at the highest level. This failing is linked solely to the verb, *ḥazoh*: *Va-yeḥezu et ha-Elokim va-yokhelu va-yishtu*. Maimonides therefore distinguishes Exodus 24:11 within its own subcategory, but he does not apply the same approach to his discussion of *ra'oh*.²⁶

One may critique Efodi's analysis by taking into account Maimonides' overall interpretation of the vision in Exodus 24. As will be clarified later, Maimonides applies Exodus 24:10 (*ra'oh*) exclusively to elucidate how the nobles of Israel fail to achieve a complete apprehension of God. The "eating and drinking" related in 24:11 merely reflect the consequences of the error that has already been revealed in the previous verse. Thus, Efodi's distinction between Maimonides' schematic presentation of *ra'oh* and *ḥazoh* cannot be upheld.

Maimonides arranges his discussion of the three biblical verbs for sight in a deliberate manner. In his definitions of *ra'oh* and *habbit*, Maimonides first provides examples to support their literal and figurative meanings as they relate to man. He proceeds to apply these verbs of sight figuratively to God, buttressing his analysis with biblical examples. In this regard, Maimonides establishes three categories, one literal and two figurative, for *ra'oh* and *habbit*. In his discussion of the literal and figurative meanings of *ḥazoh*, Maimonides appears to deviate from this pattern. He supports the literal definition of *ḥazoh* with prooftexts but does not define

this verb figuratively in relation to man's intellectual apprehension. Apparently, Maimonides does not find biblical examples in which *ḥazoh* connotes man's cognition.²⁷ In his figurative application of *ḥazoh* to prophetic apprehension, Maimonides divides the biblical examples into two categories, marking the second category by the qualifying statement, "The word is used in the same figurative sense."²⁸ This second category cites the example of Exodus 24:11, *Va-yeḥezu et ha-Elokim*. In this way, Maimonides maintains the number of subdivisions in his discussion of the verbs for sight, presenting three sets, one literal and two figurative, for *ḥazoh*, with the qualification that the second figurative category is actually a subdivision and not an entirely different categorization.

Maimonides alludes to his critique of the vision in Exodus 24 in two distinct but parallel manners. Utilizing the qualifying statement, "The word is used in the same figurative sense," to introduce a subcategory, he distinguishes *va-yeḥezu et ha-Elokim* from other prophetic visions which employ *ḥazoh* figuratively. In his presentation of prooftexts for the figurative meanings of *ra'oh*, Maimonides has already established two categories, relating to man's intellectual apprehension and divine "sight," which, together with the category of man's literal vision, total three groupings.²⁹ To avoid the introduction of yet another category, which would upset his tripartite presentation in 1:4, Maimonides distinguishes *va-yir'u et Elokei Yisrael* (Ex. 24:10) internally, through his schematic presentation of prooftexts supporting the figurative applications of *ra'oh* to God.³⁰ Maimonides presumes that the informed reader will discern his distinctions through careful analysis of his presentation.

At the conclusion of 1:5, Maimonides acknowledges that the vulgar external meaning of the text,³¹ intended for the "individual of insufficient capacity [who] should not wish to reach the rank to which we desire him to ascend" (1:5:31), intimates that the nobles attain a "sensual perception of created lights—be they angels or something else" (1:5:31). While "there is no harm in his thinking this" (1:5:31), Maimonides emphasizes that such an interpretation does not reveal the true import of the nobles' experience.³²

III.

Maimonides interprets the vision in Exodus 24 as a parable whose esoteric meaning relies upon Aristotelian principles. In his discussion of the biblical term, *regel*, in 1:28, Maimonides elucidates the internal meaning of the prophetic images which the nobles perceive.³³

I shall accordingly say that when it says, *Under His feet* (Ex. 24:10), it intends to signify: He being the cause and because of Him. . . . For what they apprehended was the true character of first matter,³⁴ which derives from Him, may He be exalted, He being the cause of its existence. Consider its dictum: *ke-ma'aseh livnat ha-sappir* (Ex. 24:10). If the intended signification had been the color, it would have said, "*ke-livnat ha-sappir*." The word "work (*ke-ma'aseh*)" was added because Matter . . . is always receptive and passive, if one considers its essence, and is not active except by accident. Form, on the other hand, is in its essence always active . . . and is passive only by accident. That is why Scripture applied to the first matter the expression: "as it were a work (*ke-ma'aseh*)." As for *livnat ha-sappir*, the expression is intended to signify transparency and not a white color. For the whiteness of a crystal is not due to a white color, but solely to its transparency. And, as has been demonstrated in the books on natural science, transparency is not a color; for if it were a color, it would not let all the colors be seen behind it and would not receive all of them. Now a transparent body receives all the colors in succession just because it lacks a color of its own. In this it resembles the first matter, which in respect of its true character lacks all forms and on this account is capable of receiving all forms in succession. Accordingly, their apprehension had as its object the first matter and the relation of the latter to God, inasmuch as it is the first among the things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption; and God is its creator *ex nihilo*. [1:28:60-61]³⁵

According to Maimonides, the nobles of Israel apprehend first matter, the underlying substratum of the four primary elements that compose all aspects of the physical universe (earth, water, air, and fire).³⁶ In order to grasp the ramifications of Maimonides' interpretation, it is necessary to recall Aristotle's definition of "first matter." Aristotle develops this notion to explain how the four elements are capable of transforming into one another. This transformation is possible only if there subsists an ultimate substratum, common among the elements, that is simply and completely potentiality as such. Aristotle names this entity, "first matter."³⁷ First matter is not to be regarded as the simplest material body, for it is not a body at all but an underlying element of all bodies. Therefore, it cannot be included in the category of "substance," defined by Aristotle as "an independently existing individual possessing a definable essence."³⁸ As Aristotle elucidates, "By 'first matter' I mean that which is neither a particular thing, nor of a certain quantity, nor assigned to any other category by which being is determined."³⁹ Although "real," first matter does not exist independently and is not sensibly perceived.⁴⁰ Accordingly, first matter is "altogether potential—is potentially everything—and not at all

actual—is not anything in particular . . . by definition [first matter] does not exist.”⁴¹

Furthermore, according to Aristotle, every individual thing, every substance, is composed of matter and form. Aristotle defines matter conceptually as an entity that exists in potential; theoretically, matter is in an initial state of privation of form, with the potential to receive form. It is therefore passive in its essence, and only active by accident, by virtue of its being attached to form. Form actualizes matter’s potential, giving it distinction and definition. Thus, form is active in its essence and only passive because it is related to matter. In actuality, matter never exists without form; matter and form are inseparable.⁴²

However, as the underlying substratum of all material beings, first matter in its essential character is purely formless. Hence it is “only an abstraction.”⁴³ If first matter had a distinguishable form, the forms of the elements “would be accidental properties inhering in ‘first matter’ as their substance and, hence, the transmutation of the elements would be an accidental change. But Aristotle had shown . . . that the transformation of the elements is a substantial not an accidental change.”⁴⁴ Because first matter is absolutely formless, characterless, and cannot exist by itself, it can receive all forms of the four elements in succession, thereby serving as the basis for material beings beneath the spheres.

These essential characteristics of first matter are revealed to the nobles in their prophetic vision. The nobles of Israel perceive first matter in the passive verbal form of *ke-ma’aseh* and not in the active form of *oseh*. First matter is thus described as a “piece of workmanship,” which needs to be worked upon; it is passive in its essence and only made active through its acceptance of all forms in succession.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the nobles perceive the image of *livnat ha-sappir*, which conveys the effect of the formless character of first matter on the transformation of the elements. In order to clarify this aspect of the nobles’ vision, Maimonides does not restrict *sappir* to a particular stone, as the sapphire, but he assigns it the general connotation of any type of crystal.⁴⁶ In addition, while *sappir* might conjure up images of a precious gemstone, Maimonides confines its relevance to its crystalline properties. Because Maimonides associates matter with evil and regards matter as the source of all sin and corruption,⁴⁷ he cannot relate the nobles’ vision of first matter, the underlying substratum for terrestrial matter, to the image of a precious entity. The “whiteness” of the crystal, *lavan* (construct state-*livnat*), therefore signifies transparency, not whiteness per se.⁴⁸ By highlighting this quality, Maimonides shows how the substance

of *livnat ha-sappir* comes closest to serving as a metaphor for first matter, which is insubstantial, yet “real.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, Maimonides explains that the nobles perceive first matter as a transparent crystal which, lacking a color of its own, can receive all colors successively. This depiction corresponds to the unique character of first matter, which is formless but capable of acquiring different forms in succession.⁵⁰

Maimonides substantiates his philosophical exegesis of the nobles’ vision by illustrating how Onkelos’ Aramaic translation concurs with his analysis. Onkelos translates that the nobles cognize,

“ית יקר אלהא דישראל ותחות כורסיה יקריה כעובד אבן טבא.”

Applying the third person suffix, “His,” to God’s throne and “His feet” to the throne’s footstool, Onkelos distances God from corporeal attribution.⁵¹ He further removes anthropomorphic connotations by ascribing the throne to “His Glory.”⁵² While Onkelos’ translation of *livnat ha-sappir* as *even tava* suggests that the nobles cognize a precious gemstone, Maimonides focuses exclusively on the crystalline features of this image, corresponding to first matter’s formless and indistinct character. Maimonides understands Onkelos’ reference to God’s throne as a metaphor for the heavens, in concurrence with his extended definition of the “throne (*kisse*)” in the Bible as a reference to entities of grandeur.⁵³ Onkelos thereby corroborates that the nobles of Israel cognize first matter under the heavenly spheres.⁵⁴ While the Targum focuses primarily on translation for the sake of removing anthropomorphisms and not interpretation, Maimonides reveals how the basis for Onkelos’ translation stems from his reading of Exodus 24 as a philosophical parable.⁵⁵

Maimonides’ philosophical interpretation of the nobles’ vision reveals that the nobles of Israel perceive an important aspect of Aristotelian physics, thereby attaining a key to the study of *Ma’aseh Bereshit*. The study of Physics is defined by Maimonides in his *Treatise on Logic* as the investigation of “material things . . . and all that exists in them, I mean, their accidents, properties, causes. . . .” (63).⁵⁶ In chapter 9 of *Logic*, Maimonides discusses the four causes of things in the world: “matter, form, agent, and purpose” (49). Delineating the remote material causes of the human body, Maimonides specifies,

. . . in regard to the material cause . . . the root of every organism is the earth’s vegetation; and the material cause, which is more remote than this, is water, air, fire, and earth . . . called elements. Even more remote than the elements is that which they have in common, which bears the same relation to them as that of wax to whatever is made of wax . . . these four elements change into and originate from one another, so that they have

undoubtedly some common element and this is their matter . . . what we call *materia prima* and its Greek name is *hyle*. . . (*Treatise on Logic*, 50-51)

In light of this analysis, it becomes apparent that when the nobles apprehend first matter, they acquire knowledge of the most remote material cause of terrestrial beings, in the sense that first matter serves as the “common element” of the four elements, which are the basis for all organisms.⁵⁷

The fact that the nobles of Israel achieve a true apprehension in the realm of physics is a significant achievement in and of itself. Throughout the *Guide*, Maimonides emphasizes that the study of natural science is a necessary prerequisite to acquiring a complete apprehension of God. As Maimonides notes, “. . . divine science cannot become actual except after a study of natural science . . . and its study precedes that of divine science in time . . .” (Introduction: 9). Because of its esoteric nature, the study of natural science is deemed inappropriate for the masses.

Know that with regard to natural matters as well, it is impossible to give a clear exposition when teaching some of their principles⁵⁸ as they are. For you know the saying of [the Sages] . . . “The Account of the Beginning ought not to be taught in the presence of two men” (*Hagigah* 11b). . . . Hence, these matters too occur in parables in the books of prophecy . . . for there is a close connection between these matters [natural science] and the divine science, and they too are secrets of that divine science.
[Introduction: 7]

The reason for concealing the teaching of physics is not to be found intrinsically within the subject matter, but in its “close connection” to divine science. This link is most apparent with regard to the fundamental first principles of natural science, described by Maimonides in 1:17 of the *Guide* as “Matter, Form, and Particularized Privation, which is always conjoined with Matter” (1:17:43). Significantly, Maimonides’ caution with regard to the teaching of “some” of these principles is interpreted by Efodi and Shem Tov Falaquera as a reference to the investigation of first matter.⁵⁹ Because of the esotericism applied to the study of first matter, this first principle of natural science is concealed within the parables of the Bible, as is evident from Maimonides’ analysis of Exodus 24. Through their perception of first matter, the nobles of Israel attain the requisite knowledge in their quest to apprehend God.

The unique character of first matter implies that the nobles of Israel achieve perception within the realm of divine science as well. In chapter 14 of *Logic*, Maimonides clarifies that divine science or metaphysics incorporates the study of “every being which is not matter nor a force in

matter, that is to say, of whatever appertains to God,” the investigation of incorporeal entities such as the angels, and the study of “the remote causes of the subject matter of the other sciences” (63).⁶⁰ Therefore, when the nobles perceive first matter, the remote material cause of all transient beings on earth, they gain knowledge of an important aspect of divine science. Furthermore, Maimonides asserts in 2:17 that the creation of first matter is unique in that “it is not subject to generation as are the things generated from it, nor to passing-away as are the things that pass away into it, but is created from nothing” (2:17:297). The everlasting quality of first matter highlights that first matter “is primarily a metaphysical and ontological principle and only secondarily a physical one.”⁶¹

The nobles’ apprehension of first matter is an important accomplishment, which straddles both the realms of physics and metaphysics. As Sarah Klein-Braslavy explains, Maimonides intimates that “there is identity between the secrets of physics, the issues of the first principles (*ha-devarim be-hatḥalot*) of physics, and the secrets of metaphysics.”⁶² The secrets of natural science “are too the secrets of divine science” (*Guide*, Introduction: 7).

The significance of the nobles’ apprehension within the realm of metaphysics is made more apparent through Maimonides’ juxtaposition of their vision with Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot. In order to illustrate the philosophical relationship between the two visions, Maimonides draws upon the Aramaic translation of Jonathan ben Uziel. Ezekiel perceives four *ofanim*, which are moved by the cherubim (*ḥayyot*) of the chariot (1:15-16).⁶³ These *ofanim* are depicted in 10:13 as *galgalim*, or “wheels.” The four *ofanim* have one likeness and are joined together as if they are “one wheel upon the earth” (1:15). The appearances of the *ofanim*, described in 1:16 as *ke-ein tarshish* and in 10:9 as *ke-ein even tarshish*, are translated by Jonathan ben Uziel as *ke-ein even tava*. This is the same translation that Onkelos applies to the *livnat ha-sappir* apprehended by the nobles of Israel. In his analysis of Ezekiel’s vision in 3:2-4 of the *Guide*, Maimonides concludes that Ezekiel apprehends the four elements of terrestrial matter, described as *ofanim*, as well as the first matter, “the one wheel upon the earth,” the common substratum between the elements. The association of the *ofanim* with the image of wheels highlights that the four elements are comparable to spherical entities.⁶⁴ Jonathan ben Uziel’s translation of the appearance of the *ofanim* as “*ke-ein even tava*” corroborates that Ezekiel perceives the properties of the first matter of the sublunar world, as did the nobles in Exodus 24 based on Onkelos’ version. Thus, Maimonides declares in 3:4 of the *Guide*,

With regard to his saying about them, “*ke-ein tarshish*” (Ezek. 1:16), he interprets this also in the second description, saying with regard to the *ofanim*: “*u-mar’eh ha-ofanim ke-ein even tarshish*” (Ezek. 10:9). Jonathan ben Uziel, peace be on him, translated this: “*ke-ein even tava*.” Now you already know that Onkelos used this very expression to translate: “*ke-ma’aseh livnat ha-sappir*” (Ex. 24:10); he says: “*ke-ovad even tava*.” There is consequently no difference between its saying, “*ke-ein even tarshish*,” and its saying, “*ke-ma’aseh livnat ha-sappir*.” Understand this. [3:4:424]⁶⁵

With this insightful analysis, Maimonides reveals how the nobles of Israel achieve a significant perception of the world of the *ofanim*, an integral feature of the vision of *Ma’aseh Merkavah*.⁶⁶

IV.

Despite the fact that the nobles perceive an important apprehension in the realms of physics and metaphysics, Maimonides classifies their vision as “imperfect,” one for which they deserve to perish.⁶⁷ According to commentators on the *Guide*, the key to Maimonides’ criticism lies in his analysis of the nobles’ apprehension of *Elokei Yisroel* and the relation of first matter to the God of Israel, which is portrayed through the metaphor, “And under His feet” (Ex. 24:10). Maimonides renders the biblical term, “foot,” in this context, in the sense of causation (1:28:59).⁶⁸ “Under His feet” signifies “He being the cause and because of Him” (1:28:61). The apparent repetition within this definition implies two aspects to the idea of causation, the cause and its effect. As Maimonides explains, “For when a thing exists for the sake of some other thing, the latter is the cause of the former” (1:28:59).⁶⁹

The *Guide* frequently relates God to the physical world, for He is the “First Cause of all things” (2:48:409). According to Maimonides, “the opinion of all who believe in the Law of Moses our Master . . . is that the world as a whole . . . every existent other than God, may He be exalted, was brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely nonexistent . . .” (2:13:281). Throughout his writings, Maimonides describes God’s relation to matter as distant, evident only through the forms, which He indirectly causes to inhere in matter. In his *Treatise on Logic*, Maimonides explicates, “. . . his [man’s] matter is life, his form is the rational faculty . . . and his agent is the one who gave him his form or his rational faculty, because by ‘agent’ [the efficient cause] we mean the creator of form in matter, and this is God, blessed be He. . .” (50). In 1:69 of the *Guide*, Maimonides describes God as the *most* remote efficient cause of the world, or the First Mover of the physical universe. “In

this way every action that occurs in Being is referred to God . . . even if it is worked by one of the proximate efficient causes; God, considered as efficient cause, is then the remotest one” (1:69:168).⁷⁰ Maimonides further specifies in 2:12 that God is described as the ultimate efficient cause of the universe because “the world derives from the overflow of God and . . . He has caused to overflow to it everything in it that is produced in time” (2:12:279). In addition, God is described as “the ultimate form and the form of forms; that is, He is that upon which the existence and stability of every form in the world ultimately reposes and by which they are constituted. . .” (1:69:169)

Insofar as God is not the direct efficient cause of the universe, but the ultimate cause, He carries out His will by the intermediation of various incorporeal beings, which “emanate” from Him. These emanated entities are described as “separate intelligences,” beings which have no matter⁷¹ but are nevertheless linked to matter as movers of the celestial spheres. The tenth intellect, the Active Intellect, is closest to the earth and is the proximate cause for investing the terrestrial world with forms. The heavenly spheres act as further intermediaries, transmitting the overflow of the intelligences to the transient bodies of the material world.⁷²

According to Maimonides, had the nobles’ apprehension of God been complete, the Bible would have simply recorded “They saw the God of Israel.” This description leaves no doubt that the nobles apprehend God’s essence and existence, to the extent that He permits man to conceive of them at all. However, the portrayal of God in connection with first matter signifies that their perception is imperfect. As Maimonides explains in 3:8 of the *Guide*, the ultimate cognition of the divine involves a quelling of the material impulses in man and a complete focus on man’s very noble form, described as “God’s image and His likeness.” Maimonides espouses, “He should take as his end that which is the end of man qua man: namely, solely the mental representation of the intelligibles, the most certain and noblest of which being the apprehension, in as far as this is possible, of the deity, of the angels, and of His other works.”(3:8:432-33).⁷³ Since God’s relation to matter is distant and indirect, an apprehension which focuses solely on His relation to the source of all transient material beings is deficient. Therefore in 1:5, Maimonides declares, “The nobles of the children of Israel . . . achieved apprehension, but only an imperfect one. Hence it is said of them: ‘And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under His feet’ . . . and not merely: ‘And they saw the God of Israel.’ For these words are solely

intended to present a criticism of their act of seeing, not to describe the manner of their seeing" (1:5:30).⁷⁴

If, in fact, the Bible supplies the details of this vision in order to explicate the sequence of the nobles' vision, the Bible should have initially portrayed their cognition of first matter and all that derives from it and only afterward described their vision of the God of Israel. This is the proper sequence of apprehension, from a perception which links physics and metaphysics to the upper echelons of divine science. But the nobles perceive the "God of Israel" followed by their apprehension of first matter. As Joseph Ibn Kaspi graphically explains, "It is as if one would describe a king in his chambers, his maidservant washing her clothes before him" (*Ammudei Kesef*, 19).⁷⁵ Such a depiction contrasts sharply with Isaiah's vision in which he perceives God sitting on His throne surrounded by angels (Is. 6:1-2).⁷⁶ Accordingly, Maimonides detects that the Bible's mode of presentation alludes to its censure of what the nobles perceive.

The question that remains to be addressed is how Maimonides interprets what the nobles discern to be the relationship between God and first matter. Do they view God as the proximate cause or remote agent of first matter? The answer to this question hinges on an understanding of Maimonides' conception of the imperfection of the nobles' vision. Maimonides characterizes this imperfection by observing that "corporeality entered into it to some extent" (1:5:30). It is therefore necessary to determine what aspect of the vision Maimonides assigns an element of corporeality. This analysis will resolve why the nobles of Israel engage in physical activities (eating and drinking) following their prophetic vision.

One approach adapted by commentators of the *Guide* surmises that Maimonides evaluates the vision in Exodus 24 as both incomplete and flawed. In their view, the nobles erroneously attribute corporeal aspects to God by misconstruing God's relation to the physical world in the chain of causation. This approach explains the relevance of the nobles' vision within the lexicographical chapters of the *Guide*. While 1:5 does not define new biblical terms, its analysis of the nobles' vision demonstrates the consequences of ascribing corporeality to God. Thus, Maimonides concludes 1:5 with the summation, "Our whole purpose was to show that whenever the words *re'iyah*, *ḥaziyah*, and *habbatah* occur in this sense, intellectual apprehension is meant and not the eye's sight, as God, may He be exalted, is not an existent that can be apprehended with the eyes" (1:5:31).⁷⁷

According to one perspective espoused by commentators of the *Guide*, the nobles misapprehend the intermediaries that transmit the overflow of God to the physical world and God's relation to them. Efodi presumes that the nobles of Israel equate God (*Elokei Yisrael*) with the separate intelligence that causes the motion of the sphere of the sun (*koah be-galgal ha-shemesh*). "His feet" refer to the lowest sphere, the moon (*galgal ha-yareah*),⁷⁸ and "under His feet," which derives from this sphere in the emanative process, is terrestrial first matter.⁷⁹ A variation of this approach assumes that the nobles of Israel equate the Active Intellect with the direct proximate cause of first matter, precluding the intermediation of the spheres. This error, while not attributing corporeality directly to God, illustrates that the nobles of Israel misconstrue the emanative process that overflows from God.⁸⁰ A more radical view interprets Maimonides as saying that the nobles of Israel err in equating God with the heavenly spheres themselves.⁸¹

While Abarbanel agrees that the nobles misconstrue God's causal relation to the material world, he maintains that a close reading of the *Guide* suggests an alternate approach to Maimonides' intent. Abarbanel observes that Maimonides speaks only of two aspects of the nobles' vision in 1:28, God (*Elokei Yisrael*) and first matter; he does not mention the separate intelligences or the spheres.⁸² Abarbanel thereby concludes that in Maimonides' view, the nobles err in their conception of God as the proximate efficient cause of first matter, without the mediation of the intelligences or the spheres. Abarbanel supports this interpretation through his careful reading of Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide*. According to Ibn Tibbon's rendition of 1:28,⁸³ Maimonides writes,

והיתה השגתם אם כן החומר הראשון ויחסו לשם להיותו ראש בריאותיו.

Assuming that the underlined term is the verb, ייחס, Abarbanel reads: "They *related* first matter to God." Accordingly, Abarbanel maintains that in Maimonides' view, the nobles transgress in their identification of God as the direct, not the remote, cause of first matter. As Abarbanel explains,

Accordingly their apprehension had as its object the first matter and they related it (ויחסוהו) to God, inasmuch as it is the first among the things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption; and God is its creator (1:28) . . . according to his [Maimonides'] opinion, these nobles perceived the first matter, which changes from one form to another, through the causation of God (*be-hana'at ha-El Yitbarakh oto*) without another

intermediary. Therefore, Scripture says, “and under His feet . . .,” that is to say, “He being the cause and because of Him.” [Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22a]

This erroneous perception results in the deleterious consequence of ascribing corporeality to God. As Abarbanel elucidates, “. . . they attributed to the Creator a measure of corporeality (*gashmut mah*) since they said that He is the proximate efficient cause of first matter (*meni’a karov la-ħomer*)” (*Ateret Zekenim*, 25).⁸⁴

Abarbanel rationalizes how the nobles of Israel might have arrived at this faulty conclusion. As a result of their miraculous experiences in Egypt and at the Red Sea, they infer that God is the proximate cause of these providential acts, performing them without intermediaries. Consequently, they conclude that God is also the proximate efficient cause or direct mover of first matter and all material bodies that derive from it.⁸⁵

Abarbanel’s approach elucidates why Maimonides concentrates on this vision within the framework of the *Guide*. Since Maimonides views matter as imperfect, flawed, and inherently evil, God can have no relationship to matter per se, except through its forms which are good and permanent. Therefore, it is most appropriate that Maimonides would highlight an example of the consequences when one errs in ascribing to God a direct relationship with first matter and what derives from it.⁸⁶

Although Abarbanel’s approach appears to have unraveled the mystery of Maimonides’ interpretation of Exodus 24, Joseph Ibn Kaspi observes that Maimonides’ description of God’s relation to the physical world throughout the *Guide* challenges the validity of Abarbanel’s stance. While Ibn Kaspi lived before Abarbanel, an analysis akin to that of Abarbanel had already been circulating during his time. Ibn Kaspi’s reaction to this approach is instructive in pointing out its deficiencies.

“For what they apprehended was the true character of first matter which derived from Him, may He be exalted, He being the cause of its existence” (*Guide*, 1:28). I am astonished regarding some of the wise men of my time who are all better than I and how their eyes have been obscured by this language. For this language is as [it appears] one hundred times, whether in the *Guide* or in works of physics and truly, where is there language more accurate than this? And they claim the intent is that they erred because they believed [first matter] derived from God without an intermediary and He is the proximate [efficient] cause for its existence (*sibbat mezi’uto ha-kerovah*). And where are these words in our *Guide*? [*Ammudei Kesef*, 40]

A survey of the *Guide* validates Ibn Kaspi’s contention. The *Guide* often describes God generally as the *cause* of the physical world, without

mentioning the intermediary roles of the separate intellects and the celestial spheres. As Maimonides highlights in 2:48,

It is very clear that everything that is produced in time must necessarily have a proximate cause, which has produced it. In its turn that cause has a cause and so forth till finally one comes to the First Cause of all things, I mean God's will and free choice. For this reason all those intermediate causes are sometimes omitted in the dicta of the prophets, and an individual act produced in time is ascribed to God, it being said that He, may He be exalted, has done it. All this is known. [2:48:409-10]

With regard to first matter, Maimonides declares, "But we maintain that God has brought it [first matter] into existence from nothing . . . and its Creator may, if He wishes to do so, render it entirely and absolutely nonexistent" (2:17:297). While God does not have a direct relationship to first matter, He is described as its creator, for God is its ultimate and final cause. Accordingly, Maimonides' nebulous wording regarding the nobles' vision does not incontrovertibly intimate that they perceive God erroneously as the proximate efficient cause of first matter. His description allows for the possibility that they cognize God accurately as the remote efficient cause of first matter.

Ibn Kaspi highlights further how Abarbanel corrupts Maimonides' original intent by reading the term, *ויחסו*, as a verb, since this term reads as a noun in Arabic.

And therefore, they interpret . . . "ויחסו לשם היות ראש לברייתו" . . . that this implies the nobles related it to God (*ויחסו אותו לשם*). For *ויחסו* denotes "his relation" (*יחס שלו*) for this term is a noun according to the Arabic. And therefore they added that when he [Maimonides] said "והוא מחדשו" . . . "להיותו ראש בריאותו" [this indicates that they perceived God as the creator, and first matter as the first of His creations] without an intermediary. And all of their words are in vain. [*Ammudei Kesef*, 40]

Joseph Ibn Kaspi offers a modified approach on the ground that the aforementioned interpretations also assign the nobles of Israel a gross misconception of God during a prophetic experience, misapprehending His nature as did the nations of the world prior to the giving of the Torah.⁸⁷ In his opinion, the nobles' perception is genuine. Interpreting *Elokei Yisroel* as the separate intelligences, Kaspi claims that the nobles of Israel correctly apprehend the intellects, under whose feet is found the first matter. However, they do not perceive the complete reality of the world of the separate intelligences nor do they see beyond these intellects to apprehend God. The deficiency of their vision is not due to any erroneous impression on their part but to the incompleteness of

their cognition. For this, they deserve to perish.

[Maimonides'] intent is that these nobles perceived a complete apprehension of the first matter including the lower world whose principle element is the first matter. . . . However, because of their great foolishness and confusion they jumped and speculated on the world of the intelligences . . . and this is what [Scripture] says "And they saw the God of Israel," and there was under His feet the first matter and what derives from it. And behold the "God of Israel (*Elokei Yisrael*)" is the separate intelligence . . . they perceived the existence of the separate intellect generally (*bi-setam*) in a weak form of prophecy (*be-madregat nevu'it ḥalushah*) . . . they did not perceive all aspects of the separate intellect (*she-lo hissigu min ha-sekhel ha-nifrad kol ḥelko*). . . . Therefore Maimonides says concerning them, "They achieved apprehension, but only an incomplete one (*hissigu aval hassagah bilti shelemah*)". . . and for this they deserved destruction, even though what they did perceive was verity (*ve-im mah shehissigu mimenu hayah emet*). [*Ammudei Kesef*, 18-19]

While Ibn Kaspi removes the error of their vision from a glaring misconception of God, his reading of *Elokei Yisroel* as the separate intelligences (parallel to the opinions of his predecessors) is not upheld within the context of Maimonides' analysis of this vision. Although Maimonides notes elsewhere that the separate intelligences or angels are often designated figuratively as *Elohim*,⁸⁸ in this context, he states that the nobles perceive first matter "and its relation to God" (1:28:61), without clarifying that they cognize the separate intellects per se. Furthermore, Maimonides declares that they apprehend "the true character of first matter, which derives from Him, may He be exalted, He being the cause of its existence" (1:28:61), without specifying that the nobles of Israel perceive the intermediaries of the separate intelligences.⁸⁹ Although Ibn Kaspi's analysis has merit in relation to his predecessors' views, his interpretation introduces nuances that are not spelled out by Maimonides.⁹⁰

V.

I would like to propose a different approach to Maimonides' exegesis of the vision in Exodus 24. My analysis adopts Ibn Kaspi's presumption that Maimonides interprets the nobles' perception as incomplete, not flawed. In light of the covenant (Ex. 24:3-8) which serves as the backdrop for this episode and Maimonides' classification of this apprehension as a prophetic vision, it seems unlikely Maimonides would suggest that the nobles cognize erroneous truths about the divine. The explanation I will offer

remains loyal to Maimonides' precise wording and decodes his intent as it is expressly conveyed in the *Guide*. Significantly, I maintain that the aspect of corporeality which Maimonides views as an integral part of the nobles' vision may be identified within the context of their vision without presuming a fallacious apprehension on the part of the nobles.

Let us reexamine Maimonides' classification of the nobles' vision. Maimonides declares that the nobles "achieved apprehension, but only an imperfect one" (1:5:30). The muted tone of this description is apparent when compared with other expressions that Maimonides could have employed to delineate his assessment. For example, in 1:33, Maimonides exhorts, "Know that to begin with this science is very harmful, I mean the divine science. . . . If, however, he begins with the divine science, it will not be a mere confusion in his beliefs that will befall him, but rather absolute negation" (1:33:70-71).⁹¹ Had the nobles of Israel acquired a faulty impression of God, Maimonides would have classified their vision as wholly invalid.

Maimonides' cryptic description of the imperfection of the nobles' vision must be scrutinized. "Thus they were blamed solely for the form that their apprehension took inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent" (1:5:30). The restrained language ("to some extent") as well as Maimonides' ambiguity with regard to what aspect of the vision is "corporeal" suggests that he does not presume the nobles ascribe corporeality directly to God. Maimonides' formulation highlights that this vision consists of aspects related to the physical realm. It does not intimate that the nobles apprehend God's causal and formal relation to this realm erroneously.⁹²

Although Maimonides criticizes the nobles' vision in 1:5 of the *Guide*, he does not reiterate this evaluation in 1:28, the chapter in which he spells out the content of this apprehension. This omission is peculiar, especially in light of the commentaries that rely on this chapter to deduce the error of this vision. If the nobles of Israel deserve to perish because of their imperfect vision, one would expect Maimonides to highlight his criticism once again in 1:28 of the *Guide*.

In my opinion, Maimonides reveals that the nobles of Israel attain a significant cognition within the realm of physics. Through their vision, the nobles acquire an authentic understanding of the unique character of first matter as a formless, potential non-substance, which is passive in its essence. The transparent quality of *livnat ha-sappir* highlights how first matter accepts all forms in succession, thereby serving as the basis for all material beings.

Furthermore, I suggest that Maimonides maintains that the nobles of Israel achieve a genuine perception within the realm of metaphysics. Maimonides' vague description of God as the "cause" of first matter coincides with the style of the *Guide* and thereby implies that the nobles of Israel cognize God as the most remote efficient cause of first matter, the First Cause and Mover. In addition, the nobles achieve a profound understanding of the way in which first matter came into being. Within the context of their prophetic vision, the nobles perceive that first matter is "the first among the things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption; and God is its creator *ex nihilo*" (1:28:61). While all other material beings are created from a state of relative privation, first matter, the permanent "no-thing" which serves as the ultimate substratum for all matter, is created from "nothing," a circumstance of non-reality in which God and only God exists.⁹³ Through his interpretation of this vision, Maimonides repudiates Aristotle's doctrine of eternity and demonstrates the truth of the doctrine of creation. Maimonides reiterates the divine creation of first matter in 2:17, in response to Aristotle's claim (cited by Maimonides in 2:14:286) that first matter could not have been created since it is formless and not subject to generation and passing-away.

He [Aristotle] said . . . that it was impossible that the first matter was generated. And this is correct. For we do not maintain that the first matter is generated as man is generated from the seed or that it passes away as man passes away into dust. But we maintain that God has brought it into existence from nothing . . . it is not subject to generation as are the things generated from it, nor to passing-away as are the things that pass away into it, but is created from nothing. And its Creator may, if He wishes to do so, render it entirely and absolutely nonexistent. [2:17:296-97]

Maimonides' declaration in 1:28 of the *Guide* that the nobles apprehend the "true character of first matter, which derives from Him" (1:28:61), highlights that the nobles cognize the exact characteristics of first matter *and* the authentic causal relationship between God and first matter.⁹⁴

The "corporeality" within their vision refers to the apprehension of first matter itself. Since first matter is the remote material cause of the physical universe, it has an association with "corporeality." Maimonides' stipulation that the corporeal aspect of the nobles' vision was limited ("to some extent") may be explained by the unique character of first matter, which being insubstantial, cannot be sensibly perceived but only intellectually cognized. Furthermore, first matter is perpetual, not being subject to generation or corruption as are the material entities derived

from it; only God may bring about its nonexistence. While first matter relates to the physical realm, it is metaphysical in its essential character.

The nobles' cognition of first matter through a prophetic vision has significant implications for understanding the interrelationship between philosophy and biblical exegesis within the *Guide*. While Shlomo Pines attributes to Maimonides the thesis that no human being can attain metaphysical knowledge or have positive knowledge of God, he acknowledges that one "can have negative knowledge of Him, and he can know His attributes of action, that is, he can grasp the natural phenomena and *their causes* [my emphasis]."⁹⁵ Maimonides' affirmation that the nobles perceive first matter highlights that it is possible, particularly through prophecy, to achieve knowledge of even the remote causes of natural phenomena. On the other hand, it appears that Maimonides' analysis of this vision qualifies Pines' presumption that ". . . according to Maimonides, men other than Moses . . . cannot cognize the immaterial beings or perhaps even know for certain that they exist."⁹⁶ While Pines has in mind man's inability to apprehend the separate intellects, the nobles' apprehension of first matter illuminates how God allows prophets other than Moses to overcome their corporeal restraints and achieve cognition of an entity which defies classification as a substance but is "real" in its own right. Although it has "corporeal" associations, this formless entity can only be apprehended through a medium other than sense perception. Based on his reading of 3:9 of the *Guide*, Pines concludes "that man can only know material objects or objects connected with matter."⁹⁷ While it is true that the nobles only perceive the ultimate substratum of all material beings, the fact that Maimonides regards first matter to be a unique instance of matter, an "immaterial" everlasting creation which originates uniquely "from nothing," requires one to reconsider the limitations that God places on human knowledge, especially through prophecy, within the realm of metaphysics.⁹⁸

Maimonides' application of the esoteric teachings of R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanos in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* to his philosophical interpretation of Exodus 24 reinforces the premise that Maimonides conceives that the nobles apprehend the unique characteristics of first matter and its *authentic* causal relation to God.⁹⁹ Paraphrasing R. Eliezer's teachings, Maimonides writes in 2:26 of the *Guide*,

Wherefrom were the heavens created? From the light of His garment. He took some of it, stretched it like a cloth, and thus they were extending continually, as it is said: "Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment. Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain" (Ps. 104:2).
Wherefrom was the earth created? From the snow under the throne of

His glory. He took some of it and threw it, as it is said: “For He saith to the snow, Be thou earth” (Job 37:6). [2:26:330]¹⁰⁰

Based on the Aristotelian premise that the matters of heaven and earth are different, Maimonides explains the profundity of R. Eliezer’s words and their relevance to his interpretation of the nobles’ vision.

[The] author [R. Eliezer] has in any case rendered us a great service by making it quite clear that the matter of the heavens is other than that of the earth and that they are two altogether distinct matters.¹⁰¹ One of them is attributed to Him, may He be exalted, because of its sublimity and high rank, and this is the “light of His garment” (Ps. 104:2); the other matter is remote from His light and splendor, may He be exalted, and this is the lowly matter that the author of the statement makes out to derive “from the snow under the throne of Glory.” This has made me interpret figuratively the passage of the Torah, “*ve-tahat raglav ke-ma’aseh livnat ha-sappir*” (Ex. 24:10), as meaning that they apprehended in this prophetic vision the true character of the inferior first matter. For Onkelos makes out, as I have explained to you, that “His feet” refers to the throne. And this clearly indicates that the whiteness, which is under the throne, is the terrestrial matter. . . . Thus Rabbi Eliezer . . . made it clear . . . that there are two matters, a high and an inferior one . . . the sublimity of that matter [of the heavens] and its nearness to Him and the defectiveness of the other [terrestrial matter] and also the place where it is located.¹⁰² Know this. [2:26:331-32]

According to Maimonides, Rabbi Eliezer distinguishes between the matters of heaven and earth and God’s relation to them. The splendor of the matter of the heavenly spheres is alluded to by light’s ethereal quality, which is akin to God’s incorporeality.¹⁰³ This description corresponds to the special type of form it accepts, a permanent form that is in continuous motion.¹⁰⁴ The relative closeness of the heavenly spheres to God is conveyed figuratively by associating the origin of the matter of the heavens with the light of God’s “garment.” R. Eliezer represents terrestrial first matter by a more textured though translucent substance, “white snow.” This description coincides with the characterization of first matter as *livnat ha-sappir* in Exodus 24:10, interpreted by Maimonides as a transparent crystal. R. Eliezer’s pinpointing of the location of the snow under the throne of Glory corresponds to the location of terrestrial matter beneath the heavenly spheres. This interpretation coincides with Maimonides’ understanding of Onkelos’ translation, which explains that the nobles of Israel apprehend the “gemstone (*even tava*)” of sublu-
nar first matter under the heavens, described as the “throne of His Glory.” As Maimonides declares in his discussion of the nobles’ vision in 1:28, “A pointer to this marvelous interpretation [of Onkelos] was only

given to me by a dictum of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos that I came across” (1:28:61). The snow’s location beneath the throne of Glory signifies God’s distant relationship to the first matter of the elements and all transient material beings. The remoteness of earthly matter from God and His splendor attests to the “defectiveness” of this matter and its inferior rank in the scheme of created things.¹⁰⁵ R. Eliezer’s revelation thereby confirms that the nobles cognize the specific character of terrestrial first matter and its actual relation to God; God is the “cause” of its existence, but only in the most remote sense.¹⁰⁶

VI.

While the nobles envision important revelations within the realms of physics and metaphysics, Maimonides censures their apprehension for being incomplete and imperfect, causing the nobles to react in a manner unacceptable for a prophetic experience. Whereas the nobles apprehend the true character of first matter and its causal relationship with God, Maimonides does not suggest that they conceive anything about the nature of the intelligences or the heavenly spheres. Although he reads *ke-ma’aseh livnat ha-sappir* as a parable and devotes much discussion to this figurative aspect of the vision in 1:28, he refrains from applying a philosophical connotation to the epithet, *Elokei Yisrael*. He also does not provide a philosophical interpretation for a facet of the vision that mentions the heavens, *u-khe-ezem ha-shamayim la-tohar* (Ex. 24:10). The nobles’ perception of God remains within the physical realm, for they only acquire an understanding of the basis for all terrestrial matter and its divine source.

Furthermore, Maimonides’ juxtaposition of the nobles’ vision with Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot in 3:4 of the *Guide* illustrates the limitations of the nobles’ apprehension. While the nobles perceive the world of the *ofanim*, the material substratum for all terrestrial entities, unlike Ezekiel, they do not attain cognition of the upper worlds of the heavenly spheres (*hayyot*) or the separate intelligences (*hashmal*).¹⁰⁷ Their vision falls short of reaching the heights of the study of divine science.¹⁰⁸

Accordingly, the imperfection of the nobles’ vision as understood by Maimonides is not found in what the nobles apprehend, but in what they fail to apprehend. To achieve a complete apprehension of God requires cognition of the higher echelons of divine science, the knowledge of God’s being, the attributes of His actions, and “the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things” (3:54:635).¹⁰⁹ In contrast to Moses who achieves knowledge of all of God’s attributes (1:54:123-28),¹¹⁰ the nobles apprehend only God’s cre-

ation of and causal association to first matter.

Maimonides reveals the error of the nobles of Israel by illuminating why they achieve a limited apprehension of the metaphysical realm. His analysis in 1:5 of the *Guide* sets the stage for future chapters, especially 1:32-34, which build on the principles set forth in this context.

The nobles of the children of Israel . . . were overhasty, strained their thoughts,¹¹¹ and achieved apprehension, but only an imperfect one . . . they were blamed solely for the form that their apprehension took inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent—this being necessitated by their overhasty rushing forward before they had reached perfection. They deserved to perish. [1:5:30]

Because the nobles hastily embark on the study of divine science without the requisite training, they attain an incomplete vision of God. Their neglect of the proper philosophical approach to speculation about divine things warrants their destruction.¹¹² As Maimonides proclaims in 1:34, “One engaged in speculation without preliminary study is therefore comparable to someone who walked on his two feet in order to reach a certain place and, while on his way, fell into a deep well without having any device to get out of there before he perishes” (1:34:76).

The nobles’ resultant preoccupation with “things of the body” (1:5:30), represented by their “eating and drinking” (Ex. 24:11), highlights the shortcomings of their pursuit of human perfection. According to Maimonides, man’s “dark and turbid matter” is a “strong veil” (3:9:436), which prevents man from achieving complete knowledge of the intelligibles and the divine.¹¹³ Because the nobles of Israel do not take the appropriate steps in their quest for knowledge, they apprehend God only in His relation to the corporeal realm. Consequently, they are misled into thinking that the ultimate religious devotion may be achieved through attendance to bodily activity.¹¹⁴ The form their apprehension assumes is a “stumbling block” (1:5:30) to reaching the heights of human perfection, intellectual apprehension of God as well as total, exclusive, and continuous worship of Him.¹¹⁵

In 1:5 of the *Guide*, Maimonides elaborates on the gravity of this error by citing the examples of Aristotle, chief of philosophers, and Moses, father of the prophets,¹¹⁶ who, in contrast to the nobles of Israel, proceed appropriately in their pursuit of the study of divine science.

Maimonides begins 1:5 by quoting from Aristotle’s *On the Heavens*, thereby laying the foundation for his forthcoming evaluation of the vision in Exodus 24.

When the chief of the philosophers began to investigate very obscure

matters and to attempt a proof concerning them, he excused himself by making a statement the meaning of which is as follows. A student of his books should not, because of the subject of these researches, ascribe to him effrontery, temerity, and an excess of haste to speak of matters of which he had no knowledge; but rather he should ascribe to him the desire and the endeavor to acquire and achieve true beliefs to the extent to which this is in the power of man. [1:5:29]¹¹⁷

Aristotle appears cautious and apologetic, justifying his initiative to investigate certain metaphysical phenomena.¹¹⁸ In this section of *On the Heavens*, Aristotle attempts to explain the irregular speeds of the spheres and the relationship of the stars to their spheres. Aristotle is aware that his hypotheses cannot be absolutely demonstrated, as “we have very little to start from and . . . we are situated at a great distance from the phenomena that we are trying to investigate.”¹¹⁹ At best, he seeks to find “the most plausible solution.”¹²⁰ Because of the nature of his investigation, Aristotle accentuates that one should not attribute his eagerness to attain knowledge to boldness or rashness. Nor should one rebut his efforts as the endeavors of one who hastily theorizes without the proper training for this subject matter.¹²¹

Maimonides also depicts Moses’ step by step approach to achieve divine cognition. In his first encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses hides his face, “for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex. 3:6). In addition to the “external meaning that indicates that he hid his face because of his being afraid to look upon the light manifesting itself” (1:5:29), Maimonides posits that Moses restrains himself from apprehension of the deity because of his insufficient training in this endeavor. With this cautious approach, Moses gradually acquires the preparation to merit “And the figure of God shall he look upon” (Num. 12:8).¹²² In order to buttress his analysis, Maimonides asserts that his interpretation has midrashic precedent. “The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have stated that this [“And the figure of God shall he look upon” (Num. 12:8)] is a reward for his having at first hidden his face so as not to look upon God” (1:5:29).¹²³

The nobles of Israel fail to conduct themselves as true philosophers and prophets, rashly attempting to acquire an understanding of matters for which they are unqualified. Without the prerequisite training, their perception of the metaphysical realm remains incomplete. For this, Maimonides concludes, they deserve to perish. Maimonides verifies that his harsh assessment of these great men of Israel is not exceptional but has rabbinic precedent. “They deserved to perish. However, Moses, peace be on him, interceded for them; and they were granted a reprieve

until the time they were burned at Tav'erah, whereas Nadav and Avihu were burned in the Tabernacle of the Congregation, *as is stated in a correct tradition*" (1:5:30).¹²⁴

The implications of the vision in Exodus 24 for the philosopher are so significant that Maimonides doubly warns his readers not to conduct themselves in the manner of the nobles. In 1:5, these warnings appear after the quotation of Aristotle and following Maimonides' discussion of the biblical texts referring to the apprehensions of Moses and the nobles of Israel. From a pedagogic standpoint, Maimonides chooses to stress the appropriate philosophical method by supporting his approach initially from Aristotle's works and then by studying the biblical text. The order of his presentation demonstrates Maimonides' intent to view the Bible through the lens of philosophy.

In his first exhortation, Maimonides proclaims,

In the same way [as that of Aristotle], we say that man should not hasten too much to accede to this great and sublime matter at the first try, without having made his soul undergo training in the sciences and the different kinds of knowledge, having truly improved his character, and having extinguished the desires and cravings engendered in him by his imagination. When, however, he has achieved and acquired knowledge of true and certain premises and has achieved knowledge of the rules of logic and inference and of the various ways of preserving himself from errors of the mind, he then should engage in the investigation of this subject [divine science]. When doing this, he should not make categoric affirmations in favor of the first opinion that occurs to him and should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of the deity; he rather should feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself. [1:5:29]

Maimonides' exhortation suggests that the nobles of Israel also lack the moral virtues required to achieve perfection. Had they "extinguished the desires and cravings" of their corporeal beings, they would have achieved a complete apprehension of God and His attributes of action, and they would not have preoccupied themselves with bodily activities. As Maimonides counsels in 1:34, "It is accordingly indubitable that preparatory moral training should be carried out before beginning with this [divine] science, so that man should be in a state of extreme uprightness and perfection" (1:34:77).¹²⁵

Following his explication of the error of the nobles in 1:5 of the *Guide*, Maimonides reiterates his exhortation.

This [destruction] having happened to these men, it behooves us, all the more, as being inferior to them . . . to aim at and engage in perfecting our

knowledge of preparatory matters and in achieving those premises that purify apprehension of its taint, which is error. It will then go forward to look upon the divine holy Presence. It is accordingly said: "And let the priests also, that come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them" (Ex. 19:22). Accordingly, Solomon has bidden the man who wishes to reach this rank to be most circumspect. He said warningly in parabolic language: "Guard thy foot when thou goest to the house of God" (Eccles. 4:17). [1:5:30]

Applying the example of the priests at Mount Sinai figuratively, Maimonides highlights the importance of "sanctification" of the mind through the acquisition of prerequisite knowledge before entering into the "divine camp," the study of higher levels of knowledge as that of metaphysics.¹²⁶ Maimonides also assigns a philosophical connotation to Solomon's admonition, advising that one should tread with caution in the study of metaphysics.¹²⁷

Maimonides' insistence on maintaining a proper sequence of study recalls his initial instruction to his student, Joseph son of Judah, in his Epistle Dedicatory to the *Guide*. While Joseph has a "strong desire for inquiry and . . . powerful longing for speculative matters," Maimonides cautions his student to proceed "in an orderly manner" (Epistle Dedicatory: 3-4). For Maimonides, Joseph represents the contemporary generation of students who seek to act in the manner of the nobles, rushing headlong into the study of physics and metaphysics without having laid the proper groundwork of preliminary knowledge. By following an appropriate sequence of learning, Maimonides guarantees that his student will acquire the necessary truths through "proper methods" so that his knowledge is firmly established and not acquired in a haphazard manner (Epistle Dedicatory: 4). Influenced by the Aristotelian system, Maimonides delineates in 3:51 of the *Guide* that the appropriate course of study should follow the order of mathematical sciences, the art of logic, physics, and metaphysics.¹²⁸

Maimonides' censure of the nobles accentuates the centrality of Exodus 24 within the *Guide's* philosophical framework. In 2:36, Maimonides emphasizes that knowledge of philosophy and the perfection of one's moral virtues is a necessary prerequisite for prophecy.¹²⁹ The fact that the nobles fail to climb the ladder of knowledge in its proper sequence confirms that their prophecy is not on par with the visions of Abraham or Moses. In contrast to the upper echelons of prophecy delineated in 2:45 of the *Guide*, the nobles are not addressed by a "man" or an "angel" nor do they envision as if God is speaking to

them. Yet, God allows them to attain a significant cognition of intangible, everlasting first matter, and God's relation to the physical universe through parables, a characteristic of higher levels of prophecy, as demonstrated by Maimonides in 2:45 of the *Guide*.¹³⁰ As opposed to the seventy elders in Numbers 11:25, upon who was bestowed a lower degree of prophecy through divine spirit (*ruah*),¹³¹ the nobles in Exodus 24 "saw the God of Israel" and the parabolic image of a transparent crystal (*livnat ha-sappir*) "under His feet."¹³²

Cognizant of this unusual situation, Maimonides assigns this vision an exclusive role among the various prophecies in the Bible. The nobles' apprehension and their subsequent conduct serve as a means to a greater end—to instruct the student of philosophy in how not to go about his studies and to warn him of the consequences if he fails to adopt the proper approach. The vision of the nobles teaches the limitations imposed on human cognition when it is not acquired appropriately. Knowledge of physics and metaphysics is attainable by man to the extent that he implements the philosopher's rules of study.

In light of this analysis, it is now possible to explain why Maimonides incorporates his interpretation of Exodus 24 within the lexicographical chapters of Part One of the *Guide*, which aim to dispel the misconception of God's corporeality. Because the nobles of Israel err in their approach to divine speculation, their dedication to God centers on eating and drinking. Through these actions, they demonstrate that the focus of their conception of God lies in His relation to the corporeal realm. This skewed portrayal of all that God is serves as a pedagogic tool in Maimonides' *Guide* to instruct the student of philosophy in the proper pursuit of human perfection.

The literary connection between 1:4 and 1:5 suggests why Maimonides does not place 1:5 after 1:32-34, in which he delineates the prerequisites for the study of divine science. The exhortations in 1:5 stem from Maimonides' discussion in 1:4 of the biblical terms involving prophetic vision. Following his definitions of *ra'oh*, *hazoh*, and *habbit*, Maimonides deems it necessary in 1:5 to explain the conditions by which man may reach the pinnacle of intellectual apprehension of God. The biblical examples of Moses and the nobles of Israel illustrate the scope and limitations of *ra'oh* and *hazoh* when applied figuratively to God, teach the student of philosophy the proper method of study, and set the foundation for Maimonides' philosophical approach to prophecy. 1:5 derives from 1:4; yet, it serves as the backdrop for discussion in later chapters of the *Guide*.¹³³

VII.

This study confirms the integral relationship between philosophy and biblical exegesis within the framework of the *Guide*. Maimonides applies his interpretation of the nobles' vision in order to illuminate essential principles which a budding philosopher must imbibe and implement: the notions of God's incorporeality and the chain of causation in which God functions as the First Cause and Mover; the proper sequence of study in the investigation of physics and metaphysics; and the necessity to quell one's impulses and develop moral virtue. In 1:71 of the *Guide*, Maimonides declares, "Know that many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters [the secrets of the Bible] that have existed in our religious community have perished" (1:71:175), because of the vagaries of exile and as a result of their concealment from the masses. Maimonides regards his philosophical exegesis of the Bible as a revival of Judaism's ancient legacy.¹³⁴ This praiseworthy objective of the *Guide* is substantiated through this study on Maimonides' philosophical interpretation of Exodus 24. That Maimonides considers the Bible to be "a sophisticated philosophical text . . . philosophically respectable, philosophically profound,"¹³⁵ is exemplified through Maimonides' investigation of the nobles' vision as a means to impress upon his readers certain philosophical truths and methods which are the fundamental basis for achieving the highest caliber of intellectual apprehension and worship of God.

Notes

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1. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3. All subsequent English citations from *Guide* are based on this translation, in the following sequence: part, chapter, page in Pines translation.
2. Joseph is not said to be a philosopher. Maimonides' parable of the palace in 3:51 of the *Guide*, in which he delineates five levels of people, suggests in his wording concerning the fifth level that Joseph has not yet sufficiently understood natural science and divine science. See Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Pines (tr.) *Guide*, pp. xvii-xix, and Raymond L. Weiss, "On the Scope of Maimonides' *Logic*, Or What Joseph Knew," in *A Straight Path. Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture, Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger et.al. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 255-65. The relationship between Joseph and the vision in Exodus 24 will be elaborated upon later in this study.
3. According to Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 7-10, 72-74, the distinction between external and internal parabolic meanings does not necessarily imply that each meaning addresses a different audience. Nor do these bi-levels of meaning connote the distinction between exoteric and esoteric meanings, which Leo Strauss maintained. Each meaning imparts a different form of wisdom, the external meaning "conducive to the well-being of a community" and the internal meaning directed toward conveying wisdom "related to the highest obtainable theoretical perfection of the individual" (8). These two meanings should be differentiated from the "vulgar external meaning" (7), which focuses on the meaning of the words; this interpretation often leads to misconceptions especially with regard to notions of God's incorporeality.
4. However, Maimonides indicates that he will only unravel these mysteries by way of "chapter headings" (Introduction: 6). Cf. *Guide*, 2:2:253-54.
5. Maimonides' exegetical approach in the *Guide* is analyzed in: Wilhelm Bacher, *Ha-Rambam: Parshan ha-Mikra*, trans. A.Z. Rabinowitz (Tel Aviv, 1932), 11-142; Sarah Klein-Braslavy, *Peirush ha-Rambam le-Sippur Beriyat ha-Olam* (Jerusalem: *ha-Hevrah le-Hecker ha-Mikra be-Yisrael*, 1978), 17-59; Shalom Rosenberg, "Al Parshanut ha-Mikra be-Sefer ha-Moreh," *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-Maḥashevet Yisrael* 1 (1981): 85-157; and Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Pines (transl.), *Guide*, xi-lvi.
6. The vision in Exodus 24 has a long exegetical history. For an approach based on ancient Greek philosophy and deriving from the Septuagint translation, see Philo's interpretation of this vision in *Questions and Answers*, Exodus, II, 37-39; *Confusion of Tongues*, 95-100; and *On Dreams*, I, 62; II, 222, in *Philo*,

- trans. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, *The Loeb Classical Library*, 1929. For the midrashic approach, especially its censure of the nobles' behavior, see *Lev. Rabbah* 20:10 as well as *Num. Rabbah* 15:24. Parallel midrashic discussion may be found in *Ex. Rabbah* 3:1; *Tanḥuma Be-ha'alotekha* 16; *Tanḥuma Buber, Aḥarei Mot* #7, 63-64 and *Be-ha'alotekha* #27, 60. For a survey of medieval philosophical exegesis on this vision, see Shaul Regev, "Rei'yat Azilei Benei Yisrael (*Shemot* 24:9-11) be-Filosofiyah ha-Yehudit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim," *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-Maḥashevet Yisrael* 4, 3/4 (1985): 281-302. Regev discusses Maimonides' interpretation (281-86), and I will refer to his analysis in subsequent notes to clarify in what ways we concur and differ in our understanding of Maimonides' position. The theosophical approach is promoted by Naḥmanides, Exodus 24:10-11 in *Peirushei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, ed. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1959), I:450-51; and R. Baḥya ben Asher, Exodus, 24:10-11 in *Rabbenu Baḥya—Beur al ha-Torah*, ed. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967), 2:253-57. On Naḥmanides' exegesis, see Jonathan Feldman, *The Power of the Soul over the Body: Corporeal Transformation and Attitudes Towards the Body in the Thought of Naḥmanides*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, Jan. 1999, 125-30. See also Rashi, Ex. 24:10-11 and Num. 11:16 as well as Abraham Ibn Ezra, Ex. 24:10-11, for further exegesis on this vision.
7. The translation of *azilei benei Yisrael* is problematic. I have rendered this phrase based on the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Naḥmanides [Chavel, I:451], Ex. 24:11. Naḥmanides derives the term, *azil*, from *azal*, to emanate; the nobles are so called because God emanates from His spirit upon them. For another explanation, see Naḥmanides, Num. 11:17 [Chavel, II:234-35], where he elucidates that *azilut* implies a holding back; accordingly, the nobles are described as *azilim*, because God reserves some of His spirit for the nobles or because they are distinguished from among the people. Alternatively, Naḥmanides derives *azil* from *eziel*, to be near, explaining that the nobles are designated as such because they attract others to consult with them.
 8. In order to present Maimonides' exegetical approach, the Hebrew translation of the *Guide* by Samuel Ibn Tibbon will be utilized, in addition to Pines' English translation from the Arabic, as Ibn Tibbon's edition was the base text employed by Maimonides' commentators. See Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Sefer Moreh Nevukhim, with the commentaries of Abarbanel, Crescas, Efodi, Narboni, and Shem Tov* (Warsaw: R. Isaac Goldman, 1872; rpt. New York: Om Publishing, 1946). Henceforth, this edition will be referred to as Ibn Tibbon, using part, chapter, and page number.
 9. For an important analysis of the general structure and composition of the *Guide*, see Simon Rawidowicz, "She'elat Mivnehu shel Moreh Nevukhim," *Tarbiz* 6 (1935): 285-331. Compare recently, Alfred Ivry, "Strategies of Interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, II, ed. Barry Walfish (Haifa: Haifa University Press; Hanover, N.H.: University Press, 1992), 113-130.
 10. Mordecai Cohen, *Radak's Contribution to the Tradition of Figurative Biblical Exegesis*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1994, 144-163, explains that for Maimonides, the term, *hash'alah*, means a dead metaphor, a figurative expression which is so frequent that its metaphoric meaning acquires literal significance (cf. *ibid.*, 22-24, on the meaning of a dead metaphor). This

approach is especially evident in Maimonides' discussion of anthropomorphic verbs applied to God.

11. Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:19b: *u-lefi zot ha-hash'alah kol leshon re'iyah she-ba'ah ba-bore yitbarakh.*
12. Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a: *ve-al zot ha-hash'alah.*
13. Shem Tov and Efodi in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:19b, as well as Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Ammudei Kesef*, in *Sheloshah Kadmonei Meforshei ha-Moreh* (Pressburg, 1837; rpt. Jerusalem: Ortsel, Ltd., 1961), 15-16, read the phrase, *u-lefi zot ha-hash'alah*, concerning the verb, *ra'oh*, as indicative of Maimonides' intent to distinguish between the figurative sight of the human being and of God. However, the parallel phraseology applied both to man and God indicates that on some level there is a common denominator between these forms of intellectual perception, especially in light of Maimonides' understanding of Gen. 1:27.
14. As has been noted by scholars of the *Guide*, the purpose of the lexicographical chapters in part I of the *Guide* is to remove the corporeal connotation inherent within biblical terms attributed to God. See Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide*," xx ff.
15. Cf. *Guide*, 1:28:61, where Maimonides emphasizes that this apprehension is "intellectual, not sensory." Compare 2:26:331 [Ibn Tibbon, 2:26:52b], where Maimonides highlights that this perception occurs in a "prophetic vision."
16. Cf. *Guide*, 2:43:391, where Maimonides observes, ". . . *ḥazoh* and *ra'oh* have the same meaning. There is no difference between one's saying in a *mar'eh*, in a *maḥazeh*, or in a *ḥazon*."
17. Compare Ibn Kaspi's insight, *Ammudei Kesef*, 16.
18. The biblical text does not clearly identify the receivers of this vision. Ex. 24:9 reports that Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, and seventy elders "ascended." Yet, 24:11 characterizes those who perceive the vision as *azilim*. In my opinion, Maimonides excludes Moses, if not Aaron, from this prophetic experience, as it is logical to assume they would not have received an imperfect prophecy for which the apprehenders deserve to perish. Furthermore, in 1:5:30, Maimonides cites a midrashic tradition, which relates the punishments of the seventy elders at Tav'erah, and of Nadav and Avihu at the Tabernacle of the Congregation. Finally, Moses would not have reacted to a divine cognition with bodily activities. Compare Judah al-Ḥarizi, ed. with notes, S. Munk and S. Scheier, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Israel: *Hoza'at Maḥbarot le-Sifrut*, 1964), I:109, in which he confines the vision specifically to the "elders of Israel." It is therefore perplexing why Pines, throughout his translation of 1:28, insists that Moses and Aaron were included in this imperfect vision; see 1:28: 60, n. 15 and 1:28:61, n. 18.
19. Literally: "in which was included of corporeality that which was included." Pines, 1:5:30, n. 9.
20. Literally: "The nobles of the children of Israel with what happened to them in their apprehension [in the way of] stumbling blocks." Pines, 1:5:30, n. 13.
21. In 1:30:63-64, Maimonides allows for a figurative interpretation of the acts of eating and drinking. In this context, however, their reaction is interpreted literally.
22. For this insight, see Efodi and Shem Tov in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a. It is important to note that these commentators go beyond what Maimonides implies and claim that this vision, in Efodi's words, was "not, God forbid, prophetic,

for their perception was corrupt since it incorporated an element of corporeality. However, it is comparable to the other prooftexts only inasmuch as it refers to a perception from the heart.” As will be discussed, Maimonides maintains that in fact the nobles achieve a prophetic vision but one which does not reach the heights of other prophets. The distinction of this vision from other prophecies does not lie in the medium through which it is perceived but in the content of the vision. Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a, restricts Maimonides’ criticism of the nobles’ vision to the emphatic, “Know this,” and does not assign significance to the apparent segregation of Ex. 24:11 into its own category. This view, however, establishes artificial distinctions between Ex. 24:11, Gen. 15:1, and Is. 1:1, which do not hold up to careful scrutiny of the context of these passages.

23. This is Efodi’s question, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a.
24. For a different approach, consult Ibn Kaspi, *Ammudei Kesef*, 16.
25. Contrast Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:19b, who applies this juxtaposition as proof that the circumstances of Moses and the nobles of Israel are similar. Moses’ failure to apprehend God’s essence represents a “null vision (*re’iyah betelah*),” while the vision of the nobles is a “corrupt perception (*hassagah meshubeshet*).” However, Abarbanel overlooks the fact that although Moses is denied his request, God does not criticize him for asking to understand His essence (cf. *Guide*, 1:54:123-28). In contrast, the nobles apprehend an “imperfect” vision (*hassagah bilti shelemah*—Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21a), worthy of causing their destruction.
26. Efodi, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a.
27. It appears that Maimonides does not deem Ex. 18:21 and Job 34:32 to be indisputable examples of the figurative application of *ḥazoh* in relation to man’s cognition.
28. Ibn Tibbon, 1:4:20a, reads: *ve-al zot ha-hash’alah*.
29. This categorization is more evident in Ibn Tibbon’s rendering, 1:4:19b, *u-lefi zot ha-hash’alah*, which introduces biblical examples of divine “sight” relating to the verb, *ra’oh*.
30. Solomon Maimon, *Giv’at ha-Moreh*, ed. Shmuel Bergman and Natan Rotenstreich (Jerusalem: Publication of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1965), 40, attempts to prove that Maimonides distinguishes *vayehezu* from other prophecies through a different approach. In the Ibn Tibbon version, the figurative definition of *ḥazoh* is described as *hassagat ha-lev* and not as *hassagat ha-sekhel*, as with *ra’oh* and *habbit*; this distinction implies that the vision of Exodus 24 is a lower form of prophecy. However, the Arabic for *hassagat ha-lev* reads לאדראך אל עקל. *עקל* is usually translated by Ibn Tibbon as *sekhel*. Furthermore, in 1:39:88-89 [Ibn Tibbon, 1:59b-60a], Maimonides defines *lev* as thought. Cf. al-Ḥarizi, *Moreh Nevukhim*, 60, notes.
31. This categorization is adapted from Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, 7.
32. The role of the “created lights” in the *Guide*, and the influence of Saadyah Gaon’s *Kavod* theology on Maimonides, requires further investigation. Cf. 1:19:46, in which Maimonides sees no harm in considering the “glory” (*kavod*) of God to be the “created light.” See also Maimonides’ discussion in 1:21:51.
33. For the relationship between 1:28 and other chapters in the *Guide*, consult Rawidowicz, “*She’elat Mivnehu*,” 301-02.

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34. Pines, 1:28:61, translates, “true reality of first matter.” Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:47a, renders *amitat ha-ḥomer ha-rishon*. I have rendered “true character of first matter,” for “true reality” implies that there is a reality which exists in opposition to this true reality, a notion that is meaningless in this context. For this suggested translation, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer of my paper.
35. Maimonides leaves the final aspect of their perception, namely, “*u-khe-ezem ha-shamayim la-tohar*” (Ex. 24:10), obscure. This omission forms the basis for one of Abarbanel’s many criticisms of Maimonides’ exegesis of this vision. Refer to Don Isaac Abarbanel, *Sefer Ateret Zekenim* (Warsaw: pub. Dubersh b. Alexander Toresh, 1894; rpt. Jerusalem: *Sifriyah le-Maḥashevet Yisrael*, 1968), 27, question (*safek*) 5.
36. First matter, or as translated by Ibn Tibbon, *ḥomer rishon*, refers specifically to the matter underlying the four elements, and not to matter per se. Compare Ibn Tibbon’s *Perush Millim Zarot*, at the conclusion of his translation to the *Guide*, 4a, under “hyle.” See also Moses Maimonides, *Treatise on Logic*, trans. and ed. Israel Efros (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1938), 51. Significantly, this vision only teaches the basic Aristotelian definition of prime matter and does not incorporate the idea of “corporeal form,” which Avicenna and Averroes attach to first matter, transforming Aristotle’s views considerably. This presupposition is important, for, as will become apparent in this study, Maimonides does not consider first matter to be a substance, while Avicenna and Averroes assign to it substantial qualities. Note, for example, that when Maimonides discusses, in 2:13:284, the opinion of “Aristotle, his followers, and the commentators of his books” concerning the perpetual state of first matter, he does not raise the issue of corporeal form and its relation to the notion of first matter. For a detailed discussion of the historical development of these ideas, refer to Arthur Hyman, “Aristotle’s ‘First Matter’ and Avicenna’s and Averroes’ ‘Corporeal Form,’” in *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume*, eds. Saul Lieberman and Arthur Hyman, I, English section (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965), 385-406. However, see the opinion of the unnamed scholar with whom Abarbanel debates in *Ateret Zekenim*, 23, which claims that according to Maimonides the nobles envision God as a second matter, consisting of first matter attached to a corporeal form. With regard to Abarbanel’s repudiation of this view, see Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 68-69.
37. Note that Aristotle does not consider “first matter” to be the material basis of the spheres, since the matter of the heavens is not subject to generation and corruption. See *The Metaphysics*, II, XII, VIII, 1073a, 35-39; Cf. *On the Heavens by Aristotle* II, VII-VIII. Maimonides also distinguishes between terrestrial matter and matter of the spheres. Compare his discussion in 1:72, 2:11, 2:19 and 2:26 of the *Guide*. See also Nahmanides, Gen. 1:1 [Chavel, I:12] and Gen. 1:8 [Chavel, I:19-20], who applies this Aristotelian notion to his analysis of the creation process.
38. For this formulation of Aristotle’s definition of substance, see Hyman, “Aristotle’s ‘First Matter,’” 391, based on *The Metaphysics*, V: 8, 1017 b, 23-26.
39. *The Metaphysics*, VII: 3, 1029a, 20-21. I have based this translation of Aristotle’s passage on Hyman, “Aristotle’s ‘First Matter,’” 394.
40. In *The Metaphysics*, VII: 10, 1036a, 8-9, Aristotle states that first matter is “unknown in itself.” Cf. Hyman, *ibid.*, 394, n. 45. Furthermore, Aristotle, *De*

Generazione et Corruptione, II, I, 329a, 24-26, states that first matter “has no separate existence.” See Hyman’s discussion, *ibid*, 393.

41. Cf. Wallace I. Matson, *A History of Philosophy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, American Book Co., 1968), 124.
42. These distinctions between matter and form are further elaborated upon by Maimonides in *Guide*, 1:17:43 and 3:8:430-31.
43. Matson, *A History of Philosophy*, 124.
44. Hyman, “Aristotle’s ‘First Matter,’” 393-94, based on *De Generatione et Corruptione* I, 1-2.
45. See Shem Tov’s insight in Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:47a. See also Salomon Munk, trans. and ed., *Le Guide des Égarés*, 1st edn. (Paris: A. Franck, 1856-66), I:97, n. 1. For an alternate approach, compare Judah Kaufmann (Judah Ibn Samuel), ed., *Moreh Nevukhim* (Tel Aviv: Shevil Pub., 1935), 121, notes, who translates *ke-ma’aseh livnat ha-sappir* as “like the property of the whiteness of the gemstone,” a property which is later described by Maimonides as the formlessness of first matter and its capability of receiving different forms in succession. In his view, Maimonides does not read special significance into the term, *ke-ma’aseh*, as indicative of the passivity of first matter (as opposed to *oseh*). However, if this were the case, Maimonides would not have written a separate explanation for *ke-ma’aseh*, followed by a discussion of the meaning of *livnat ha-sappir*. Maimonides stresses at the conclusion of his opening discussion on matter and its relation to the vision of Exodus 24, “That is why Scripture applied to the first matter the expression: *ke-ma’aseh*” (1:28:61). This statement indicates that Maimonides reads *ke-ma’aseh* as an allusion to the internal meaning of this parable, independent of other aspects of the parable.
46. Maimonides employs the Arabic term, *billur*, as the translation of *sappir*. As Pines, 1:28:61, n. 19, and Munk, *Le Guide*, I:97, n. 2, observe, the use of this Arabic word suggests that Maimonides does not identify *sappir* as a specific type of stone but as any transparent matter. Cf. Ibn Tibbon, 2:19:43a [corresponding to Pines, 2:19:309], who renders “transparent” as *sappiri*.
47. *Guide*, 3:8:431 and 3:9:436; Cf. 3:11-12:440-448. On the other hand, Maimonides acknowledges in 3:8:433 that there are a few individuals who possess “suitable matter” which does not corrupt nor dominate; however, this matter is endowed as a “divine gift.” For a discussion of Maimonides’ Neoplatonic attitudes toward matter in relation to his Aristotelian philosophical leanings, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 90-102. For a discussion of Neoplatonic influences on Maimonides in further aspects of the *Guide*, see Alfred Ivry, “Islamic and Greek Influences on Maimonides’ Philosophy,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Pub., 1986), 139-56.
48. The image of whiteness is adapted by Rashbam on Ex. 24:10; Ibn Ezra also cites this approach in the name of Saadyah Gaon. However, the midrashic tradition identifies *livnat* with *leveinah*, a brick, applying this vision to the notion of Divine providence over Israel, even during times of enslavement, as depicted by the “bricks” that lay at God’s feet. See *Yerushalmi Sukkah* 6:3 and *Lev. Rabbah* 23:8.
49. Compare Shem Tov in Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:47b.
50. Maimonides’ minimal application of the metaphor of *livnat ha-sappir* may be contrasted with the Arabic concept of *jauhar*, precious stone, applied by

Arabic philosophers to convey how substance is the most precious of categories. For a discussion of this Arabic notion, compare Averroes' Epitome of *Metaphysics*, I:26; II: 9-13, analyzed in Harry Wolfson, "Arabic and Hebrew Terms for Matter and Element with Especial Reference to Saadyah," in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Isadore Twersky and George Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), II:389 and 389, n. 16. Maimonides does not apply *livnat ha-sappir* to a substance, but to first matter which is not corporeal. Furthermore, he does not view this stone as precious in any sense, but focuses exclusively on its transparency as a metaphor for the unique character of first matter.

51. This analysis follows Maimonides' explanation of Onkelos' rendition in *Guide*, 1:28:60. This reading differs from that given by commentators of the *Guide* who did not possess the original Arabic text. Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:45b, reads: "piresh Onkelos bo . . . she-hu shem kinui raglav shav el ha-kisse." Commentators on this Hebrew version, as Efodi and Shem Tov [in Ibn Tibbon, 1:45b-47a], understand *kinui* as a denomination or designation. From their perspective, Maimonides notes that Onkelos applies the "denomination" of "His feet" to the throne, intimating that the entire phrase, "His feet," is a metaphor for the throne. However, there is no basis for equating "foot" with "throne" in the Bible. More importantly, the Arabic for Ibn Tibbon's *kinui* translation reads *damir*, a term which connotes third person possessive suffix, as Pines explains, 1:28:60, n. 11. This clearly indicates that Maimonides only interprets the possessive, "His," of "His feet," to denote the throne. Apparently, Maimonides assumes that Onkelos intended "foot" to connote the footstool of the throne. Compare the comments of Munk, *Le Guide*, I: 94-95, n. 3 as well as Moses Narboni in his commentary to 1:28 of the *Guide*, at the conclusion of Ibn Tibbon's version of *Moreh Nevukhim*, 4a.
52. Praising Onkelos for his worthy efforts to preserve the sense of God's incorporeality, Maimonides declares in 1:28:60, ". . . admire how far Onkelos was from belief in the corporeality of God and from everything that leads to it. . . . For he does not say, 'And under His throne.' For should the term 'throne' have been referred to God . . . this would have entailed the consequence that He would have been conceived of as sitting upon a body and thus would have entailed the belief in corporeality. Accordingly, Onkelos referred the term 'throne' to His Glory, I mean to the Indwelling [*Shekhinah*]. . . ."
53. As Maimonides observes in *Guide*, 1:9:34, ". . . the heaven is called a throne, as indicating to those who have knowledge of them and reflect upon them the greatness of Him who caused them to exist and to move, and who governs this lower world by means of the overflow of their bounty."
54. As Maimonides explains in *Guide*, 1:28:61, "Know that you require such an interpretation even according to the interpretation of Onkelos, who translates: 'And under the throne of His Glory.' I mean to say that the first matter is also in true reality under the heaven that is called the throne." Compare Shem Tov's analysis of Maimonides' understanding of Onkelos in Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:47b. Interestingly, however, Onkelos renders the nobles' "eating and drinking" following the vision as a metaphor for the divine acceptance of their sacrifices. This view does not coincide with Maimonides' censure of the nobles' actions. Maimonides' inattention to this aspect of Onkelos' translation forms the basis for Abarbanel's criticism of Maimonides' approach; see *Ateret Zekenim*, 28.

55. In *Guide*, 1:28:60, Maimonides emphasizes, “The end with a view to which Onkelos makes this translation consists in the rejection of the doctrine of corporeality of God. He does not explain to us what they apprehended and what is intended by this parable . . . he is not concerned with such significations, but only with the rejection of the doctrine of the corporeality of God.” This disclaimer stands out in contrast to Maimonides’ insistence that Onkelos’ translation affirms his philosophical approach to this parable.
56. Maimonidean scholars are generally in agreement that Maimonides authored this treatise. However, see Herbert Davidson, “The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Maimonides,” in *Me’ah She’arim. Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer, et. al. (Jerusalem: The Hebrew Univ. Magnes Press, 2001), 118-25, who questions the attribution of this work to Maimonides.
57. However, Weiss, “On the Scope of Maimonides’ *Logic*,” 261, observes that first matter is also the remote efficient cause, the agent that enables change to occur among the four elements; as he notes, “Prime matter is the remote cause not in the sense of an efficient cause that brings the elements into existence but as that which makes possible the sort of change found among the elements.”
58. Ibn Tibbon, Introduction: 5a, renders this phrase, “*be-lamed kezat hathaloteihem*,” specifying the fundamental first principles, which parallels Maimonides’ discussion in *Guide*, 1:17:43.
59. As Efodi, in Ibn Tibbon, Introduction:5a-b, explains: “*be-lamed kezat hathaloteihem*: that is, it is not possible to reveal some of the matters of natural science to the masses, and this refers to the matter of *homer ha-rishon* by way of parable. . . .” Compare Abarbanel and Shem Tov, in Ibn Tibbon, Introduction: 5a; however, Shem Tov also includes the other first principles, matter, form, and privation of form. See also Klein-Braslavy, *Peirush ha-Rambam le-Sippur Beriyat ha-Olam*, 29-34, who discusses Ibn Tibbon’s rendition and the commentators’ approaches to the esotericism of the study of physics in relation to divine science.
60. See Pines, *Guide*, “Translator’s Introduction. The Philosophic Sources of The Guide of the Perplexed,” cxii-cxiii, for the influences of Averroes and Avicenna on Maimonides’ definition of metaphysics.
61. Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas*, 75. Compare Weiss, “On the Scope of Maimonides’ *Logic*,” 261, who notes that the study of prime matter is “so metaphysical a topic.”
62. Klein-Braslavy, *Peirush ha-Rambam le-Sippur Beriyat ha-Olam*, 31.
63. Compare Ezek. 10:9, 16. Maimonides analyzes this aspect of the vision in *Guide*, 3:2-3:417-23.
64. This analysis of Maimonides’ categorization of the *ofanim* in relation to the *hayyot* (the world of heavenly spheres) and *hashmal* (the realm of separate intelligences) follows the commentaries of Shem Tov, Efodi, and Crescas in Ibn Tibbon, 3:3:5b; compare Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22b. The reading of Maimonides’ application of the *galgalim* to the *ofanim* as a reference to the sphericity of the terrestrial elements, diverges from Pines’ conclusion, 422, n. 3, that Maimonides identifies the *ofanim* as the heavenly spheres. Compare Leonard Kravitz, *The Hidden Doctrine of Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed* (Lewiston/Lampeter/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 38-39, 133-34, 198-99, who adapts Pines’ translation and applies it to uncover Maimonides’ hidden doctrine of eternity, especially with regard to the

matter of the heavens. My reading of Maimonides does not lead one to conclude that he is adopting Aristotle's position in this context.

65. It is important to note, however, that Maimonides admits (in 3:4:424-25) that Jonathan himself identified the *ofanim* as the heavens (assuming that *galgalim* in Ezek. 10:9 refer to the sphericity of the heavens) and not to terrestrial first matter. This apparent incongruity is noted by Abarbanel, *Ateret Zekenim*, 101. (However, Abarbanel's argument against Maimonides' position stems from his disagreement with the Aristotelian presumption that the matters of heaven and earth are different.) Maimonides himself is mindful of his divergent interpretation. Nevertheless he feels justified in adapting Jonathan's translation of "*even tava*" for his own reading since the obscurity of the biblical text allows for more than one exegetical approach. As he responds in 3:4:424-25, "You must not find it incongruous that, having mentioned the interpretation of Jonathan ben Uziel, peace be on him, I propounded a different interpretation. You will find that many among the Sages, and even among the commentators, differ from his interpretation with regard to certain words and many notions that are set forth by the prophets. How could this not be with regard to these obscure matters? Moreover I do not oblige you to decide in favor of my interpretation... God knows in which of the two interpretations there is a correspondence to what has been intended." With this statement, Maimonides highlights his reverence toward his predecessors but also professes his independent stance toward biblical interpretation.
66. Shem Tov in Ibn Tibbon, 3:5:6b-7b, highlights how Maimonides considers even the study of the *ofanim* within Ezekiel's vision of the chariot to be a sensitive area of learning and yet a necessary one to achieve the heights of intellectual perception of divine science.
67. As will be discussed, in 1:5:30, Maimonides follows *Num. Rabbah* 15:24, which describes that the elders of Israel perish in Tav'erah, and Nadav and Avihu perish in the Tabernacle, due to the error of this vision.
68. In this chapter, Maimonides assigns the biblical term, "foot," an equivocal role, having three distinct meanings; among them is the idea of causation.
69. This meaning is noted in reference to a parallel usage of "foot," in Gen. 30:30.
70. Compare *Guide*, 1:16:42, in which Maimonides defines *zur* (rock) with relation to God because "He is the principle and the efficient cause of all things other than himself." For a definition of the Aristotelian notion of "efficient cause," see T. H. Irwin, "Aristotle," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), I:419, who notes that efficient cause refers to "the source of change," meaning the source of the process which brings something into being; this is also referred to as the "moving cause."
71. See *Guide*, 2:22:318, where Maimonides distinguishes between matter and "that which being separate [i.e. the separate intelligences] has no matter at all." So, too, in 2:4:259, Maimonides notes the "separate intellects that are in no way a body." Cf. Shem Tov's interpretation, in Ibn Tibbon, 2:22:48a.
72. Maimonides delineates the emanative process in *Guide*, 2:4-12. See also his discussion in 2:22:317-20; significantly, Maimonides notes that while the intelligences have no matter, the heavenly spheres are composed of matter.
73. Cf. *Guide*, 1:26:56-57 and 3:51:627-28.

74. Compare Efodi's explanation in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21b.
75. Compare Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22a.
76. This comparison is cited by Shem Tov, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21b.
77. This approach is further substantiated by Maimonides' explanation of the external meaning of this vision, which claims that the nobles do not err but correctly perceive the "created lights." Maimonides allows for this alternative, as it does not ascribe corporeality to God. See the explanations of Shem Tov and Abarbanel on the phrase, "there is no harm in his thinking this" (1:5:31), in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:23a.
78. Cf. *Guide*, 2:9:269, concerning the position of the moon in the hierarchy of the spheres.
79. Efodi, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22a. Compare Shem Tov Falaquera, *Moreh ha-Moreh*, in *Sheloshah Kadmonei Merfarshi ha-Moreh*, 160: ". . . for Nadav and Avihu . . . thought that God was a force in the sphere (*ruah ba-galgal*) and this is what he [Maimonides] said, 'which incorporated corporeality (*asher bi-khelalah min ha-gashmut*).'" See also his commentary in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22a-b. As noted by Regev, "Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael," 286-87, Shem Tov's approach is more general than that of Efodi. Abarbanel, *Ateret Zekenim*, 23, attributes this opinion to Zerahiyah Halevi. For the rationale behind this approach, see Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, 68, who correlates this interpretation with the beliefs of Sabianism. As Maimonides explains in *Guide*, 3:29:515, the Sabians preached "that God was the spirit of the sphere and that the sphere and the stars are a body of which the deity, may He be exalted, is its spirit." Accordingly, this perspective attributes to the nobles a vestige of paganism, viewing the deity as an integral part of the natural world. Interestingly, this approach presumes the eternity of the world, "since in their opinion [that of the Sabians] heaven is the deity" (3:29:515), a doctrine that Maimonides clearly disputes in his analysis of the nobles' vision, as will be discussed further on in this paper.
80. Efodi and Shem Tov, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21b-22a, mention this opinion anonymously, explaining "that they perceived the Active Intellect (*ha-sekhel ha-poel*) to be the proximate cause (*ilah kerovah*) of first matter and it is in this way that the vision incorporated an aspect of corporeality, for the intellect inasmuch as it is an intellect, cannot move matter without an intermediary." Ibn Kaspi, *Ammudei Kesef*, 20, quotes this opinion with reference to the separate intelligences in general, not the Active Intellect per se. Abarbanel, *Ateret Zekenim*, 23, disallows this approach, claiming that this error is "small" in comparison and would not warrant destruction.
81. This opinion is quoted anonymously in Ibn Kaspi, *Ammudei Kesef*, 20.
82. As Abarbanel, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21b, comments, "This [opinions of his predecessors] is a greater error in my eyes than the error attributed [by Maimonides] to the nobles of Israel, for Scripture did not mention [regarding *ve-tahat raglav ke-ma'aseh livnat ha-sappir*] the throne (*kisse*), or the sphere, or the heaven."
83. Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:47a.
84. See also his commentary in Ibn Tibbon, 1:28:46b-47a and *Ateret Zekenim*, 24-25. Compare Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, 70, on Abarbanel's interpretation of Maimonides. Al-Ḥarizi, *Moreh Nevukhim*, 111, reads in the same way as Abarbanel: *ve-yiḥasu oto la-Bore*.
85. Abarbanel, in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21b.

86. Abarbanel's own interpretation of this vision is explicated in *Ateret Zekenim*, ch. 8, 26-28, and ch. 19, 69-73, and in his commentary on the *Torah*. For an analysis of Abarbanel's positive evaluation of the nobles' prophecy, see Regev, "Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael," 294-97. Compare Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, 71-78, where he especially discusses the role of the nobles' vision within the context of *Ateret Zekenim*.
87. As Ibn Kaspi, *Ammudei Kesef*, 20, exclaims, "And behold it is difficult for me to push aside the explanation of some of the wise men of my time . . . [who have interpreted] that the nobles attributed corporeality to God. But this is a falsehood in my opinion, and the loyal witness is what Maimonides indicates in 2:26, that their vision was a prophecy (*mar'eh nevuah*), and so [Maimonides noted] in 1:4. And Heaven forbid, that we should say that in a prophetic vision this terrible error would be apprehended, that the nobles should be compared to Enosh or to Nimrod."
88. Cf. *Guide*, 2:6:261-62.
89. While Maimonides declares in 2:6:265, that all visions of an angel or separate intellect must be perceived through the medium of prophecy, he does not cite Exodus 24 among his examples of this type of vision.
90. For an analysis of Ibn Kaspi's own interpretation of the vision in Exodus 24, which is based significantly on that of Ibn Ezra, see Regev, "Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael," 287-89.
91. Ibn Tibbon, 1:33:52a, reads, *bittul le-gamrei*.
92. My opinion contrasts with that of Regev, "Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael," 285, who claims that, "Maimonides explains that this perception was a corporeal perception, the corporeality of the divine and His presence within matter (*hagshamat ha-Elohut ve-hakhnasato be-tokh ha-ḥomer*)—*livnat ha-sappir*."
93. For this interpretation of the pre-created state of "nothing," see Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas*, 73-76. Dobbs-Weinstein's thesis diverges from Alfred Ivry, "Beriyat ha-Olam lefi ha-Rambam," in *Sefer ha-Yovel li-Shlomo Pines*, Vol. 2 (1990), 115-37, who posits that the state of absolute privation is a subsistent reality, an actual state of non-existence.
94. Maimonides' assumption regarding the creation of first matter by God and the ramifications of this premise for his doctrine of creation are developed in Dobbs-Weinstein, 74-76; see especially her observation, 74, "that Maimonides' affirmation of the created nature of prime matter seems to be beyond dispute. . . ." This approach challenges Kravitz, *The Hidden Doctrine of Maimonides' Guide*, especially 38-41, 62-63, 129-34, who proposes that Maimonides' interpretation of the nobles' vision as a cognition of first matter in the Aristotelian sense demonstrates that Maimonides presumes first matter is eternal as did Aristotle. Kravitz assumes that the inherent contradictions in the *Guide*, in which Maimonides appears to accept Aristotle's definition of first matter but then argues that first matter is created, verifies Maimonides' hidden belief in the doctrine of eternity. In my opinion, Maimonides interprets the nobles' vision to buttress the doctrine of creation and repudiate Aristotle's notion of the eternity of the world.
95. Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 98.
96. *Ibid.*, 98.
97. Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge," 92.

98. For responses to Pines' arguments, see, for example, Barry S. Kogan, "What Can We Know and When Can We Know It? Maimonides on the Active Intelligence and Human Cognition," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 121-137, and Herbert A. Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," in *Maimonidean Studies*, Vol. 3, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1992-93), 49-103. These scholars, however, do not mention the vision in Exodus 24 within their studies.
99. Although Maimonides cites R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanos' teachings in 2:26 of the *Guide* primarily for the issues it raises concerning the doctrine of creation, he also discloses how these teachings support his exegesis of the nobles' vision. Whether R. Eliezer believed in eternity or creation from "nothing," has long been debated. See recently Ivry, "*Beriyat ha-Olam lefi ha-Rambam*," 134-137, and Kravitz, *The Hidden Doctrine of Maimonides' Guide*, 123-39. Nahmanides, Genesis 1:8 [Chavel, 1:20], emphatically assumes that R. Eliezer's dictum promotes the idea of creation.
100. This citation is based on R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanos, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer im Beur ha-Radal* (Warsaw, pub. by Zvi Yaakov Bamberg, 1852; rpt. New York: Om Pub., 1946), 3:7b-8a. The actual version of Rabbi Eliezer's dictum concerning the origin of the earth, reads, "Whence was the earth created? He took of the snow (or ice) which was beneath the Throne of Glory and threw it upon the waters and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed" (3:8a). Apparently, this means that the dust of the earth was formed from congealed water (=snow or ice) which was produced from a "snow" that originated from under the Throne of Glory. Compare the commentary of *Yefeh Toar* on *Gen. Rabbah* 1:6: "In the beginning, He created a very thin matter, and this is the snow under the Throne . . . and from this snow . . . was created a lower snow (*ha-sheleg ha-tahton*) and from this lower snow was created the earth. According to this, the earth is the third creation." The verse cited from Job is translated literally; God commanded the snow to become the dust of the earth. Cf. Abraham Ibn Ezra, Job 37:6, for the usual understanding of this verse. For parallel passages to R. Eliezer's teaching, cf. *Yoma* 54b; *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 2:1; *Gen. Rabbah* 1:6; and *Midrash Tehillim*, ed. Buber (Wilno, 1891), ch. 93.
101. Apparently, Maimonides sees a need to stress this point since there were Sages who believed that the heavens and earth derived from one common matter. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 10:3, 12:11 and *Yoma* 54b.
102. al-Ḥarizi, *Moreh Nevukhim*, 500, renders this last clause, "*shiflut mekomo*." Although this is not a literal translation, it conveys Maimonides' understanding of R. Eliezer's dictum.
103. Interestingly, Abraham Ibn Ezra regards light as an essential substance having spiritual qualities; cf. his commentary to Psalms, 36:10 and 76:5. For an analysis of this aspect of Ibn Ezra's commentary, see the discussion of Yosef Cohen, *Haguto ha-Philosophit shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Israel: Hish Pub., 1996), 84-86.
104. Cf. *Guide*, 2:11:275. Compare Shem Tov's comment in Ibn Tibbon, 2:26:52b.
105. Ivry, "*Beriyat ha-Olam lefi ha-Rambam*," 135, n. 54 and 136, n. 58, observes that Maimonides emphasizes the throne of Glory as the source of terrestrial matter according to R. Eliezer, while Maimonides distinguishes between the snow and the throne of Glory in his analysis of Exodus 24. However,

- Maimonides' interpretation of R. Eliezer assigns an intrinsic significance to the snow in relation to the throne of Glory; the snow represents terrestrial first matter, the source of sublunar matter, and it is located under the throne of glory, the figurative representation of the heavens. Maimonides differentiates between the light and the snow, as well as between God's garment and the location under the throne of His Glory. This differentiation highlights the divergent characteristics of the matters of heaven and earth and their distinct relationships with God.
106. On the other hand, Abarbanel, *Ateret Zekenim*, ch. 23, 91-95, demonstrates how Rabbi Eliezer's teachings support his interpretation of the nobles' vision, not that of Maimonides.
 107. Maimonides analyzes possible interpretations of the description of *hashmal* in *Guide*, 3:7:429-30.
 108. The delineation of the three aspects of Ezekiel's vision according to Maimonides follows the interpretations of Efodi, Shem Tov and Crescas in Ibn Tibbon, 3:3:5b; compare Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22b.
 109. As Maimonides writes in 3:54:638, "It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is."
 110. Significantly, Moses does not "eat and drink" following his perception of the divine in Exodus 33, as do the nobles.
 111. Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:21a, translates, *harsu ve-shalhu maḥashavtam*. Cf. Ibn Tibbon's understanding of their overhasty (*harsu*) behavior in *Perush le-Millim Zarot*, at the conclusion of *Moreh Nevukhim*, 4b, "*haras*."
 112. For a comparable analysis of Maimonides' interpretation of the nobles' improper training, cf. Regev, "*Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael*," 281-84. My discussion will elaborate upon Maimonides' interpretation and the significance of the nobles' vision within the context of the *Guide*.
 113. Cf. *Guide*, 3:8:430-35 and 3:54:635-36. Furthermore, in 1:26:56, Maimonides explains that while certain corporeal attributes are assigned to God anthropomorphically in order to educate the masses about Him, God is never described as eating or drinking since these activities are regarded as a deficiency by the multitude.
 114. In contrast to Maimonides' approach, Nahmanides [Chavel, I:451], describes their eating and drinking as "*simkhah ve-yom tov*," applying these activities to the consumption of the *shelamim* sacrifices, offered in Ex. 24:5. For a discussion of Nahmanides' approach, see Hayyim Henokh, *Ha-Ramban ke-Ḥoker u-ke-Mekubal* (Jerusalem: H. Fischel Institute Pub., 1982), 197-200.
 115. For a discussion of the pursuit of human perfection in this regard, see *Guide*, 3:51:620-24. Maimonides struggles with the importance of intellectual apprehension of God and the fact that many commandments involve physical activity. Cf. David Shatz, "Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection: A Reading of *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51-54," in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides*, ed. Ira Robinson, et. al. (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 77-129, and Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, especially 68-76.
 116. Moses is also referred to by Maimonides in *Guide*, 3:12:448, as "the Master of those who know." However, it is important to keep in mind that Moses'

- designation as prophet is understood as an equivocal term; cf. *Guide* 2:35:367.
117. This is Maimonides' free translation of Aristotle's words. In W.K.C. Guthrie, trans. and ed., *On the Heavens by Aristotle* (London:Wm. Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1939), II, 12, 291b24-28, 203, the quote reads as follows: "There are two difficulties which might naturally be felt [regarding the metaphysical questions which Aristotle will attempt to explain], and we must do our best to give the most plausible solution, looking upon a readiness to do so as evidence of modesty rather than of rashness, if the seeker, out of thirst for philosophy, rests content with but a little enlightenment in matters where we are surrounded by such unfathomable obscurities."
 118. However, in *Guide*, 2:19:307-08, Maimonides indicates that through these declarations Aristotle expressed "the feebleness of what he said" (307). This critical evaluation of Aristotle's words is not as apparent in 1:5 and not in the original text of *On the Heavens* as cited in the above note. It is possible that Maimonides introduces this negative tone for his own polemical purposes, since 2:19 deals with one of Maimonides' arguments against the doctrine of eternity. For another approach to this variation in Maimonides' quotations of Aristotle, see Joel L. Kraemer, "Maimonides on Aristotle and Scientific Method," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1989), 59-61.
 119. *On the Heavens*, II 12, 292a16-18, 205.
 120. *Ibid.*, II 12, 291b25-26, 203.
 121. Despite these warnings, Aristotle does not feel that one should leave these matters in obscurity.
 122. As he states in *Guide*, 1:5:29, ". . . he . . . should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward apprehension of the deity; he rather should feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself. It is in this sense that it is said, 'And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God' (Ex. 3:6) . . . [Moses] . . . was commended for this; and God, may He be exalted, let overflow upon him so much of His bounty and goodness that it became necessary to say of him: 'And the figure of God shall he look upon' (Num. 12:8)."
 123. Compare *Berakhot* 7a; *Ex. Rabbah* 3:1; *Lev. Rabbah* 20:10; and *Num. Rabbah* 2:25. For discussions regarding Maimonides' application of rabbinic sources to buttress his philosophical exegesis, compare Klein-Braslavy, *Peirush ha-Rambam le-Sippur Beriyat ha-Olam*, 47-51, 56-57; James A. Diamond, "The Use of Midrash in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*: Decoding the Duality of the Text," *AJS Review* 21, 1 (1996), 39-60; Rosenberg, "*Al Parshanut ha-Mikra be-Sefer ha-Moreh*," 128-38; and Yisroel Rosen, "*ha-Rambam ve-Yaḥaso le-Midrashot*," *Shemaatin* 6 (1970), 48-53.
 124. For Maimonides' midrashic sources, see *Lev. Rabbah* 20:10; *Num. Rabbah* 2:25, 15:24. Cf. *Tanḥuma*, *Be-ha'alotekha* 16 and *Tanḥuma Buber*, *Be-ha'alotekha* #27. However, I did not find any mention of Moses' prayer in these sources. Maimonides' identification of the content of the nobles' vision as an apprehension of first matter does not have midrashic precedent as far as I know.
 125. Cf. Abarbanel in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:20b-21a, "And the Rabbi said that one must learn from Aristotle . . . that a person should [also] refine himself

- greatly in his conduct (*middot*) and extinguish his cravings. And I think that the Rabbi intended through this [citation of Aristotle] to point out the errors of the nobles of the children of Israel . . . for they were also not perfect in their conduct, as it is written, ‘And they ate and drank.’”
126. Cf. the explanation of Efodi on Maimonides’ metaphor in Ibn Tibbon, 1:5:22b. Significantly, this philosophical interpretation of Ex. 19:22 is cited by Maimonides’ father, as quoted by R. Abraham b. Rambam in his commentary to this text. See *Likkutim* in the Arabic, following *Iggeret ha-Nehamah* of R. Maimon, ed. A. Simon (*Hashkafah Anglit Bet*, 1890). This parallel is noted in Judah Ibn Samuel (Judah Kaufmann), *Moreh Nevukhim*, 63. Cf. Abraham Ibn Ezra, the “long commentary,” Ex. 19:22, where he notes that the priests, while already holy, should “continue to sanctify themselves in their thoughts.”
 127. This proof-text also appears in a parallel context in *Guide*, 1:32:69-70. There, Maimonides reiterates, “This means that you should let your intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp. For in regard to matters that it is not in the nature of man to grasp, it is...very harmful to occupy oneself with them.”
 128. Cf. *Guide*, 3:51:619. Compare the discussion of Kraemer, “Maimonides on Aristotle,” 59-64, on Maimonides’ exhortation to Joseph concerning the proper sequence of study. See also Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger, “On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam-And Today,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 2(1990): 37-50, who discuss Maimonides’ attitudes in the *Mishneh Torah* in relation to *Guide*, 1:32-33, toward intellectual inquiry and the need for adequate preparation as well as his exhortations to the qualified student to proceed with caution in the study of divine science.
 129. Cf. especially *Guide*, 2:36:372; compare 2:32:361.
 130. See the third and eighth degrees of prophecy delineated in *Guide*, 2:45:400-01. Compare Maimonides’ discussion of the parables perceived in prophetic visions in 2:43:391-93. However, Maimonides does not cite Exodus 24 within the examples of the various degrees of prophecy in *Guide*, 2:45:396-403.
 131. See Maimonides’ discussion of this example, *Guide*, 2:45:398, second degree of prophecy.
 132. While it is possible that the nobles of Israel in Exodus 24 are the seventy elders referred to in Num. 11:25, the types of prophecy received in both contexts are not parallel. In Numbers, they prophesize or speak through divine inspiration (*ha-ruah*), whereas in Exodus 24, they behold a vision of first matter and God’s relation to it through symbolic images and parables. In 2:45:395-96, Maimonides acknowledges that an individual may receive prophecies of differing degrees at various times throughout his life. My approach contrasts with that of Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides on the Science of the *Mishneh Torah*: Provisional or Permanent?,” *AJS Review* 18, 2 (1993): 180-81, who characterizes the prophecy of Exodus 24 as “a low level of prophetic inspiration” (181), comparable to the prophecy of the seventy elders in Numbers 11.
 133. Note how Maimonides returns to the topic of 1:4 in his concluding statements in 1:5:31: “Our whole purpose was to show that whenever the words *ra’oh*, *hazoh*, and *habbit* occur in this sense, intellectual apprehension is meant and not the eye’s sight, as God, may He be exalted, is not an existent that can be apprehended with the eyes.” For a similar analysis on this point,

see Rawidowicz, "She'elat Mivnehu shel Moreh Nevukhim," 293, and Regev, "Re'iyat Azilei Benei Yisrael," 282-83. Strauss' solution, in Pines, *Guide*, xxvii-xxviii, seems to miss the significance of Maimonides' discussion of the vision in Exodus 24 altogether. So, too, Terence Kleven, "A Study of Part I, Chapters 1-7 of Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*," *Interpretation* 20, 1 (1992): 12-13, who views the primary purpose of 1:5 as affirming the "perfection of Moses' apprehension of God" (12), over and above the prophecies of Miriam and Aaron.

134. The parallel of *Guide*, 1:71 to my discussion, was suggested to me by Josef Stern, "Philosophy or Exegesis: Some Critical Comments," in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 221-222. See also Stern's observation regarding the relationship between philosophy and exegesis, *ibid.*, 216, "Maimonides' philosophical views . . . clearly shape his conception of scriptural exegesis. But the influence also runs in the other direction: Maimonides' role as an exegete also leaves its imprint on his conception of classical philosophical problems."
135. As noted by Ivry, "Strategies of Interpretation in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," 122.